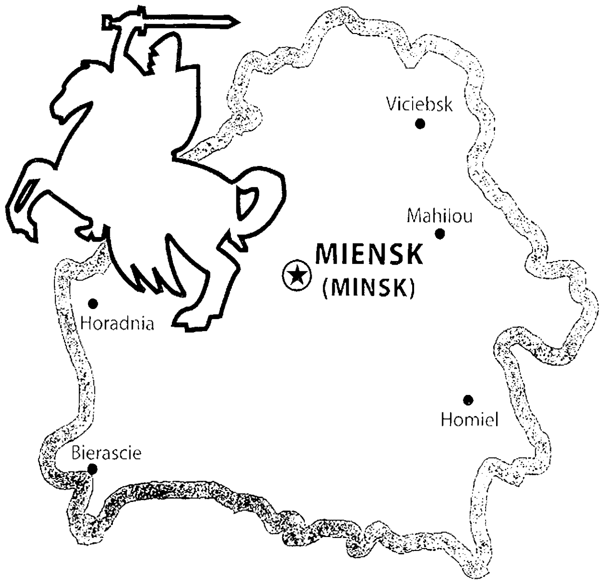


BELARUSIAN REVIEW



SPRING 2007
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In this issue:

EDITORIAL

To Talk Or Not To Talk?

By Jan Maksymiuk

There were two remarkable attempts by Europe in March to enter into dialogue with the Belarusian government.

First, EU High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy Javier Solana dispatched a group of aides to meet with Belarusian Foreign Minister Syarhey Martynau in Minsk. The visit followed Solana's cautious statement that he sees "some possibilities of doing or opening some relationship with Lukashenka." The results of this mission, however, have remained undisclosed so far.

Second, the Working Group on Belarus in the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) organized jointly >with the Belarusian authorities a seminar in Minsk on March 15 to discuss possibilities for Belarus within the EU Neighborhood Policy. This event was particularly notable because of the attendance of some representatives of Belarus's civic society and NGOs. It was apparently the first time since late 1999 — when the OSCE tried but failed to organize a dialogue between the authorities and the opposition ahead of the 2000 parliamentary elections — that representatives of the government and its opponents sat at the same table in Minsk.

Nothing of importance has resulted from this seminar, but Bundestag lawmaker Uta Zapf, who heads the OSCE Working Group on Belarus, approved of it as of a sort of "experiment" that needs to be continued in the future. In fact, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly wants to hold another such seminar in Minsk in the fall.

It is evident that Europe's hopes for a "new opening" with the autocratic president of Belarus have been stirred by the cooling of "brotherly ties" between Minsk and Moscow in the wake of the Russian gas-and-oil price hikes for Belarus in January. Plus, most likely, by Lukashenka's resonant interviews for the German daily *Die Welt* and Reuters following the energy prices row, in which he slammed Moscow for "increasing imperial tones" and hinted at changing his tack with the West.

But anybody jumping to the optimistic conclusion that the energy dispute with Russia has made Lukashenka rethink his vision of democracy should read his interviews for *Die Welt* and Reuters for one more time. Despite his harsh epithets with regard to the Russian leadership, Lukashenka has in no place renounced his drive to seek rapprochement with Russia. And in no paragraph has he promised to mend his authoritarian ways. Indeed, in the interview with Reuters Lukashenka explicitly stated that the Western demands to democratize Belarus are tantamount to "dismantling" Belarus' political system.

The point is that Russia's gas-and-oil price hikes have not affected the Belarusian ruling regime to the extent that it may feel urged to take some radical or unconventional steps in the near future, such as, for example, >reconstructing the country's economy or slackening political repression.

Judging by all appearances, Lukashenka decided to buy time by taking loans, including from Russia and China, to cover the increased expenditures for energy resources. There is a chance for him that after Russia's parliamentary elections in 2007 and presidential elections in 2008 the Kremlin's attitude toward Minsk may change to his advantage. In any case, this attitude should not worsen. A Russian nationalist group is currently promoting Lukashenka on the Internet as a candidate for the 2008 presidential polls — no matter whether the Kremlin likes it or not, the Belarusian president remains a factor in Russia's domestic policies that should be reckoned with.

What are the lessons for Europe from this seemingly new situation in Belarus, which so strongly resembles the old one?

First, Europe should not deceive itself by assuming that the gas-and oil price hikes have made Lukashenka's regime more vulnerable to external pressure than before. If the energy row with Russia in January 2007 has demonstrated anything at all, it was the fact that the Kremlin, like the EU, does not have any significant levers of influence in Belarus.

Second, Europe should not deceive itself by assuming that taking some steps to please Lukashenka — for example, striking some Belarusian officials off the EU travel ban list — would make the Belarusian regime more cooperative and pro-European.

The time between 1999, when the OSCE wanted to involve Lukashenka in dialogue on conditions of democratizing the electoral legislation, allowing the opposition to the state media, and loosening political repressions in the country, and 2007, when the OSCE essentially repeated the same demands, was filled by Lukashenka with a long string of repressive measures that all but obliterated Belarusian independent media and all but eradicated the very existence of independent thought in society.

Unless Lukashenka backs down on his ways of treating political opposition or independent thought in Belarus as criminal offenses, talking with him does not have any practical value.

It is apparent to everybody that the European politicians have already become strongly frustrated by their numerous failures to produce some visible change in Belarus. But yielding to Lukashenka even more that they had done so far seems to be an exceptionally bad medicine for this frustration. A much better idea might be is to expand the EU travel ban list to include more Belarusian officials who so willingly carry out Lukashenka's dictates.

On Belarusian Independence Day

"It is with great expectation I am turning to you, my fellow Belarusians, both at home and abroad, to ask you to demonstrate on the 25th of March that we are united in reviving our country in order to pass to our children and grandchildren — not the last dictatorship in Europe — but a free Belarusian Democratic Republic."

From address by Ivonka Survilla, the President of the Rada of the Belarusian Democratic Republic in Exile, on the occasion of the 89th Anniversary of Declaration of Belarusian independence.

From the Publisher

The Belarus Democracy Reauthorization Act of 2006 has been signed into law by the President as PL 109-480.

The Act authorizes material support for the next two years for variety of democracy-building activities. It also authorizes support for radio and television broadcasting into Belarus, in order to overcome the regime's information blockade. Finally, it supports the imposition of sanctions against the regime, including for all those responsible for fraudulent elections, arrests and imprisonment on trumped up charges.

The amount of financial support for these measures was left on 'as much as is needed' basis. It will be up to the Appropriation Committees in the House of Representatives and in the Senate to determine the amounts. The following legislators should be contacted. Their fax numbers or e-mail addresses can be found on the www.Congress.org site.

Representative Nita M. Lowey (NY), Chair of the State, Foreign Operations Committee
Representative Frank R. Wolf (VA) the Ranking Member of the same Committee

Senator Patrick J. Leahy (VT), Chair of the State, Foreign Operations Committee
Senator Judd Gregg (NH), the Ranking Member of the same Committee

Let them know that the need to continue our support for democracy in Belarus is now even greater. As Europe's last dictator, Alexander Lukashenka not only continues to trample the fundamental rights of his own people, but promotes the establishment of an anti-American coalition with various other repressive rulers.

QUOTES of QUARTER

"We'll insist on securing freedom ... in Cuba, Belarus, Myanmar (Burma)"

PRESIDENT BUSH, at a meeting of Republican Governors on February 26.

FEATURES

Belarus-Poland Borderland And the European Union

Part 2

Study of the problems in context of the European Union enlargement

September 4-10, 2005 with minor updates in 2006.

The study consists of two parts, part 1 in the previous issue dealt with the Bialystok region in Poland, part 2, in this issue, with the Hrodna region in Belarus.

The shifting of borders during the last century

Prior to World War I both regions were part of the Russian Empire. After the revolution in Russia and the subsequent war between the Soviet Union and Poland, a peace treaty was concluded in Riga in 1921 that directly affected Belarus. According to the Riga Peace Treaty, the armistice line became the actual border, and the western part of Belarus was incorporated into Poland. In the interwar years between 1921-1939 the local non-Polish population was subject to polonization, together with political and cultural discrimination.

As part of the Ribbentrop-Molotov agreement in 1939, the Soviet Union annexed western Belarus, and both Bialystok and Hrodna regions became part of the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic.

Under German occupation in 1941-1944, the Bialystok region became part of the Eastern Prussia province, and in 1945 the Soviet-Polish treaty gave the Bialystok region to Poland. The new border between Hrodna and Bialystok exists to this day.

Two recent conflicts on either side of the border described in the next two condensed articles are an illustration of the ongoing regional tension.

Belarusian Authorities vs. the Union of Poles

The Union of Poles of Belarus (Związek Polaków na Białorusi) was founded in 1986 as a national and cultural association of the Polish national minority in Belarus.

Until recently it was the leading organization of Poles in Belarus. Similar to other nationality organizations, the mission of the Union of Poles of Belarus (UPB) was to preserve Polish language and culture, to develop its education system and to help the Polish community to satisfy its cultural needs. Since the early 1990's the UPB leadership promoted cooperation between Belarus and Poland, supported democratic changes and the development of civic society in Belarus. Tadeusz Gawin was elected chairperson of the organization. UPB established contacts with some pro-democratic organizations. Such cooperation assumed greater importance after the constitutional crisis of 1996 and the growth of authoritarian tendencies in Belarus.

In the late 1990's the Belarusian government strove for political control over the Union of Poles. As a result, new leadership was elected at the organization's convention in 2000, gaining official registration. The former leadership held its own convention, however the authorities failed to recognize this step, as well as to officially register it.

New amendments to the Criminal Code in 2006 aggravated the situation for part of the Polish community. The amendments defined as criminal offenses the participation in activities of unregistered organizations. The authorities violate the rights of the Polish minority regarding freedom of association. The situation around the Union of Poles is a power conflict. It is based on the desire of the Belarusian authorities to control the public and cultural life of the Polish minority. However, the actions of the authorities have not led to direct discrimination and pressure on ordinary members of the Polish community.

Trial of the Editorial Board of *Niwa*
(Belarusian weekly in Poland)

In general, during the past years the conditions for self-development of the Belarusian minority were quite favorable. The situation deteriorated in conjunction with the case of *Niwa* weekly. The criminal prosecution began in 2003 and lasted till 2006, resulting in the acquittal of the leaders of the Belarusian minority. However, it caused damage to the image and cultural activity of Belarusian organizations in Poland. Moreover, the criminal charges impaired the political activity of Belarusians on the regional level.

In the period from May to October of 2003, the Supreme Control Chamber (NIK) of Poland audited the usage of government resources in the sphere of culture in 2001-2003. Over 100 entities, including the *Niwa* weekly, were examined all over the country. In general, the Control Chamber gave a negative assessment to the work of the Ministry of Culture in the sphere of distribution of grant money. The Chamber also reported certain violations in the work of *Niwa*. Essentially, the violations were related to legislation on book-keeping. The Chamber did not reveal any embezzlement or misappropriation. In the fall of 2003 representatives of NIK in Bialystok informed the prosecutor's office about possible elements of a crime in the actions of the Editorial Board of *Niwa*. In October 2003 the prosecutor's office started an investigation against 11 members of the editorial board of the newspaper, including such influential figures in the Belarusian minority Yauhen Wapa, Yauhen Miranowicz, Michas Andrasiuk, Yury Chmialeuski.

The trial began in February 2006. At that time the relations between Poland and Belarus had deteriorated because of the pressure of the Belarusian government on the Polish minority organizations in Belarus. However, it had practically no impact on the trial in Bialystok. The verdict was announced on May 16, 2006. All 11 members of the Editorial board were found not guilty. At the same time, the court acknowledged a number of violations of the financial legislation made by the chief accountant and the chairperson of the editorial board. Simultaneously, the court recognized that meeting all the norms of the law would have made it impossible for the weekly to come out regularly. Belarusian associations of Poland and human rights organizations of Belarus were satisfied with the verdict.

The majority of the Belarusian community believes that the campaign of criminal prosecution against the Niwa publishers was organized and supported at the regional level. The prosecution was supported by a number of political organizations of the Bialystok region, as well as driven by personal negative attitudes of some law-enforcement officials towards representatives of nationality minorities.

Hrodna region, Belarus
(General characteristics of the region)

The Hrodna region is populated by around 1.2 million people. According to the census of 1999, Belarusians make up 62%, Russians – 10%, and Poles – 24.8%. Defining the national situation in the region is complicated because of russification of both groups. Thus, 65% of Poles in Hrodna region consider Belarusian their mother tongue, 16% say their mother tongue is Russian, and only 18% name Polish as their mother tongue. In everyday life the Belarusian language is used by 61% of Belarusians, 58% of Poles and 8% of Russians. Besides that, 36% of Poles use Russian, and only 6% use the Polish language in everyday life. The Roman Catholic Church plays an important role in maintaining the Polish identity. Most likely, the majority of those who identify themselves as Poles have a weakened or mixed (Belarusian-Polish) identity.

Weakening of identity is typical for all national groups in the region; the identity of practically all national groups in the region is quite vague. In general, the population has a low level of political and cultural activity. Such a situation is preserved and reinforced by the state policy in this sphere.

<u>Nationality structure of the population in some districts of Hrodna region</u>

Hrodna city: population of about 300 thousand (Belarusians 56 %, Poles 22 %, Russians 18 %); Masty district: population of about 41 thousand (Belarusians 71%, Poles 21 %, Russians 6 %); Vaukavysk district: population of about 85 thousand (Belarusians 58 %, Poles 28 %, Russians 11 %); town of Vaukavysk: population of about 47 thousand (Belarusians 60%, Poles 25 %, Russians 12 %). Voranava district, bordering Lithuania, is an area with significant predominance of Polish population. In the 37-thousand population of Voranava (according to the census of 1999), Poles make up 82.96%, Belarusians – 10.53%, and Russians – 3.28%. This is the only district in Belarus, where representatives of the Polish national community have an absolute majority both among rural and urban population, forming a good basis for development of the Polish national movement.

The city of Lida has 100 thousand residents, 38.3% of whom are Polish, 44.16% -- Belarusian, and 13.98% -- Russian. In Lida district the Polish national minority makes up 42.14%, Belarusians – 50.73%, and Russians – 5.61%. Lida and Hrodna are the two big cities in the region where Poles make up a significant percentage of the population. Hrodna is an organizational and cultural center of the Polish movement. There is the central office of the Union of Poles of Belarus (of both its parts after the split) and a Polish school. The most significant Polish events are also held here.

<u>Ethnical and cultural situation in the region</u>

A significant number of the Belarusian Poles have a two-level identity, which includes an interest in learning the Polish language, culture, origin, and such Belarusian ethnic elements, as the acceptance of the independent statehood of Belarus, sense of historical commonality with Belarusians, and respect for the Belarusian culture. Poles actively participated in the Belarusian national movement, especially in the early 1990', some of them demonstrated active support to the revival of the Belarusian language and toward the strengthening of the Belarusian element of the statehood. Activists of the Union of Poles, a leading Polish organization, were mem-

bers of Belarusian cultural and political organizations. In the current political discourse "Polishness" is very often associated with opposition and cultural disloyalty to the existing government system.

The level of the tension between the Poles and other nationality groups in the region is quite low. However, Poles, or Catholics in general, are often characterized as more enterprising, and haughty, which is partially explained by their connection with Western culture and values. In their turn, Poles and Catholics typically have a sense of a certain cultural and social superiority. They pay more attention to culture of behavior, speech, dress, have cleaner houses and backyards. Their Orthodox neighbors they often characterize as religiously passive, lazy and sloppy.

Russians are numerically the third nationality group. Their influence is especially visible in the cities, particularly, in Hrodna.. They are to a significantly greater extent inclined to support the state policy and have no problems in realization of their nationality needs. The level of tension between the Russians and other national groups is quite low, though it is to a certain degree perceptible on the everyday level. Most often Russians are symbolically associated with the Soviet state, the Army, retired military officers and non-locals, those who "came after the war", sometimes they are said to unjustly dominate in the power structures. The Russian identity in the small is a lot weaker. The majority of Russians aspire to quickly integrate into the local community and do not demonstrate a different self-identification.

The number of new migrants in the region is insignificant, and, as a rule, unnoticeable. The only exception is Hrodna, which has a certain level of negative and aggressive attitude to the dark skinned new-comers. As a border region, it attracts transit migrants, whose destination are the countries of Western Europe.

The problem of the Belarusian culture and language

Discrimination and restriction of Belarusian culture is another problem. Since the mid-nineties the authorities perceive the Belarusian language and culture as opposition-minded or as a sign of negative attitude towards the present political system. Not only do the authorities fail to stimulate, but in certain cases they work to suppress Belarusian cultural activity. The authorities have shut down practically all urban secondary schools with Belarusian as language of instruction; students have no possibility to receive higher education in Belarusian language; the authorities do not welcome the Belarusian language in the public and official spheres.

Since the middle of the nineties the status of Belarusian language and culture has been a subject of political debate, which is still vital. In the majority of secondary schools Belarusian is taught as a second language, it is also used as a language of instruction of Belarusian literature and (sometimes) history of Belarus.

Linguistic Situation

Linguistic situation differs greatly between the urban and rural areas. In the rural areas the majority of population uses Belarusian or the local language based on Belarusian with Russian and Polish influences for everyday communication. In the cities Russian language dominates in all nationality groups. Thus, in Hrodna city. Belarusian language in everyday communication is used only by 17% of Belarusians, 2% of Russians, and 16% of Poles (Polish is used only by 5% of Poles). The official sphere is dominated by the Russian language or less often by Belarusian language, primarily in the sphere of education and culture. In general, the government stimulates the spread of Russian, to the exclusion of all other languages. The majority of the printed editions of the region use Russian or both languages. There is only one newspaper in the Polish language -- *Glos z nad Niemna*, founded by the Union of Poles. Since 2005 this newspaper is controlled by the authorities. Besides that, Polish language is used by the Catholic Church. Usage of Polish in public places or on the street might provoke some irritation. (Similar situation with the street use of Belarusian may be observed in the border areas of Poland).

System of Education

Practically all urban schools have Russian as a language of instruction with rural schools – Belarusian. There are only two schools with Polish as a language of instruction in Belarus – one in Vaukavysk and one in Hrodna. In other Polish schools Polish is taught either as an obligatory subject or an optional course. Local authorities create numerous obstacles for the expansion of Belarusian and Polish as languages of instruction. Classes with Polish as a language of instruction have both ethnic Poles and Belarusians as students. There is a similar situation with Polish language as an optional subject. Motivation to learn the language varies from a desire to learn the culture of your own nationality or of the neighboring nation, to enhancing the prospects of emigration. Currently the study of Polish provides employment opportunities and educational opportunities in Poland's universities.

Religious situation

About 80% of Belarusian citizens are nominally Orthodox; about 15% are Catholic, with greatest growth exhibited by a variety of Protestant churches.. About 1/3 of the Catholics are Poles, the rest are Belarusians. The western regions of Belarus are noted for a significantly higher piety in comparison with other regions of the country. Not only most of the Catholic, but also most of the Orthodox parishes are located there.

The Orthodox Christianity is represented in Belarus only by the Moscow patriarchy. Efforts to create an autocephalous Orthodox Church are consistently suppressed by the authorities. Similarly, the authorities hamper the development of the Uniate (Greek Catholic) Church. The official Orthodox Church uses Church Slavonic and Russian, rarely Belarusian, in its work. Linguistic policy of the Roman Catholic Church differs depending on the region of the country. Catholic Church uses Belarusian in the big cities, Minsk, first of all. Polish language is most frequently used in the West, with many priests in this region being Polish citizens.

Catholicism and Orthodoxy are asymmetric in their cultural and religious activity. Catholics are significantly more religious than the Orthodox. Besides that, in case of mixed marriages an Orthodox spouse would noticeably more often adopt Catholicism than vice versa. From the cultural point of view, Catholicism is often associated with "Polishness", and Orthodoxy – with "Russianness". That is why certain typical features and stereotypes about Poles are sometimes extrapolated to all Catholics, and opinions about Russians – to all Orthodox Christians. It is considered that Belarusians can be both Catholic and Orthodox, while Poles are only Catholic, and Russians – only Orthodox. State support of the Ortho-

dox Church gives it a more privileged status comparing with other denominations. In the late nineties the government provided strong support to various anti-Catholic initiatives, mainly in the publishing and propagandistic areas. . Polish priests encountered various obstacles to their service in Belarus.

Nationality minorities and power

All nationality groups are represented in the bodies of executive and representative power. The system of power is formed on the principles of political loyalty to the regime. Sometimes one can observe certain estrangement of national minorities, primarily, Poles, from the Belarusian state. Despite regular declarations of the government about multinational and multi-denominational character of the Belarusian state, in reality the authorities stress its Eastern-Slavic basis with certain anti-Catholic elements. This is typical for political rhetoric of the state, as well as for its educational policy and ideology. Some Poles identify themselves with the Polish state and are indifferent in their attitude to the Belarusian statehood. To a certain extent it is based on the passed-on nostalgia of the 'good' pre-Soviet times when the western Belarus was part of Poland.

In the present circumstances the minorities link the main obstacles in realization of their national needs with the actions of the state. In their turn, the authorities are interested in loyalty of the nationality minorities. In general, there is no serious confrontation on the national, ethnic, or religious basis in the region. As a rule, peaceful interaction of different groups is noted in Hrodna region. Long life side-by-side resulted in a quite tolerant culture of national interaction, although that does not exclude minor prejudices and neighbor conflicts.

Participants in the Study of the problems of the Poland-Belarus borderland in context of the European Union enlargement:
Malkhaz Chemia (Georgia, Institute for Minorities and Refugees Problems), Andrei Kazakevich (Belarus, political scientist, editor-in-chief of Political Sphere magazine), Palina Stsepanenka (coordinator of the West sub-network of the Working Group, journalist, Belarus). The study was technically supported by the Hrodna branch of Lew Sapeha Foundation (Hrodna, Belarus), and the Educational Center "Poland-Belarus" (Bialystok, Poland).

QUOTES of QUARTER

"We frequently heard from the Belarusian leadership that they would prefer a Soviet-style Union... Soviet Union was a supercentralized state... So, when we heard that, we said: Why not integrate into the Russian Federation?"

" We shall continue building a Union State with Belarus."

Russian President **VLADIMIR PUTIN** at a massive press conference in Moscow on February 1.

BELARUS' FORUM

Dictatorship for a Dummy: How to Suppress Free Press

One of the most pesky problems for every rookie dictator is free press. Even the acknowledged authoritarian rulers have problems with all these journalists writing their critical stuff. This is how the journalists are being dealt with in Belarus, a very promising modern European dictatorship.

Of course, you can simply put all journalists in prison. It's simple and effective, but old-fashioned, and may cause an outcry in the world. And you don't need this in the time of globalization. If you make everything look nice, and especially co-operate in the field of illegal immigration into the European countries, they may simply overlook some peculiarities of your regime.

Thus, why not use the Belarusian method? Let the press shut itself down!

1. Write a nice big law or a constitution proclaiming the freedom of speech.

2. Write a smaller law regulating the mass media as strictly as possible.

3. Keep an eye on the free press. Sooner or later some newspaper of magazine will do something, which can be interpreted as breaking some minor article of this law.

4. If that happens, issue a warning. Say, two warnings in a year – and you have the right to shut the newspaper down. You may ask, why not to shut down the newspaper right away? Because this way there's a chance the newspaper gets scared of being shut down and begins to report things the way that will please you. Smart, isn't it? Really, what can be more useful, than free press, which serves the needs of a dictator?

5. If the newspaper doesn't begin to obey after these two warnings, suspend it or shut it down.

Here is one example:

There's a monthly magazine in Belarus called ARCHE. It's a thick publication, flashing bright covers with politically provocative collages, and publishing analytical articles and essays, which look at the Belarusian society at all kinds of angles, but all tend to be critical of the present political regime.

In September 2006 the magazine was suspended for three months because it allegedly published political articles, although it wasn't registered as a political magazine. That meant, ARCHE changed its registered themes, which was later proved in a court hearing and if you are a good dictator, you'll never allow the courts to pronounce unsatisfactory judgements!

This way, ARCHE has not been published for three months. The issues 10, 11, and 12 all appeared only in the end of December.

Now, the Ministry of Information issued another two warnings. The Ministry stated that ARCHE had no right to publish three issues in a row, since it is registered as a monthly magazine. That means, 1 "legal" issue + 2 "illegal" issues = 2 warnings.

Now ARCHE can be shut down at any time, without any more warnings, till the end of 2007. This threat will keep the editors and journalists under constant stress.

Rookie D. Senior
Source: *Nasha Niva* Blog, February 21, 2007.


Now ARCHE can be shut down at any time

Milinkevich Open Letter To Lukashenka

Dear Alexander Lukashenka,

It is not easy for me to address you, however, for the sake of the future of our Belarus, I feel that I must do so. I do agree with your view that the situation in economy may become catastrophic. This must not be allowed.

You always stress that the main goal of your policy is to ensure the sovereignty of the country and prosperity for the people. For the democratic forces it is also the main goal.

I hope that you were sincere when you spoke about the importance of developing good relations with Europe. Many Belarusians have noted your words about the necessity to have a second, European wing for a normal development of Belarus. I'm convinced that it can be achieved. The conditions for cooperation with united Europe are well known. They are contained in the proposals of the European Union addressed to the Government and the people of Belarus.

I believe that we are right in promoting a European choice for Belarus. I also believe that continued confrontation in the country will not serve the Belarusian people well. I know that despite our differences we can achieve results if our goal is the independence of the country and a better life for the people.

Today the question of the future of the country is the most important one. The challenges of the modern world – energy, demography, ecology and humanitarian issues – directly affect Belarus. The proper answer to these challenges can be provided only by a united nation responsible to the future generations. In order to assess the situation correctly and to move towards strengthening of the statehood it is necessary to recognize that reconciliation of the positions of the authorities and the opposition is as necessary for the development of the society as are the two (foreign policy)vectors –European and the Russian ones.

Belarusian opposition is in general constructive. It doesn't have radical groups planning to use force to get rid of the authorities. Despite all the efforts of the secret services to use the threat, so called Belarusian terrorists have never been found. People do not believe in the imaginary armed opposition conspiracies. On the contrary, all they can see that force is used only by the authorities against peaceful demonstrations, against the youth, women, and the elderly. Such methods could be used to maintain power but they will never gain the people's respect.

I'm not an advocate of a radical scenario. For me most appropriate would be an evolution of the Belarusian situation towards democratization of political and public life of the country, but this evolution must be steady and a guaranteed one.


Alexander Milinkevich

During last election campaign I met thousands of voters; hundreds of thousands put their signatures in support of democratic candidates. I can claim without any doubt that millions of our compatriots support a European choice, offered by the opposition and want democratic changes in Belarus. It will be no exaggeration to say that the whole world is watching us. Old methods do not work anymore.

Belarusians have a traditional way of helping each other, known as "talaka". It's time to have "talaka" for the sake of Belarus.

The recent events around Belarus cause a serious concern for the people. They worry about the worsening of the economic situation and the threat to the independence of the country. The responsibility to prevent it lies on the elite of the country, both in power and in the opposition.

You yourself say that Belarus is threatened with economic strangulation and that without investment from de-

veloped countries, first of all European states, the situation cannot be rescued. During my meetings with the leaders of the European Union and with many leaders of European countries I discussed the issue of energy s ecurity for Belarus. I always spoke out against economic sanctions against our country. However it is clear that a broad cooperation could be developed only with a democratic Belarus that observes the European standards. Our country loses billions of euros of assistance and investments for only one reason – its non-democratic political system. An authoritarian state in Europe today cannot develop successfully.

In different times national elites of such countries as Greece, Spain, Portugal and Slovakia, all of which were self-isolated, understood the necessity of change. They made their choice in favor of democracy and thus ensured the real prosperity of their people. I can use the international reputation and the contacts of democratic forces for a joint solution of the urgent problems facing our country.

However this cannot be done if my colleagues remain in prison, if force is used against the youth, which we all witnessed in recent days, if the pressure is applied to NGOs and political parties, if the rights of independent trade unions are infringed, if the full-fledged functioning of the independent press is not restored, if human rights are grossly violated despite the international obligations of Belarus.

It is necessary to overcome the divide in the Belarusian society as soon as possible. The best way for it is a dialogue. Only as a result of a dialogue between the opposition and the authorities and having a common position we can count on talks with Europe in order to develop an effective cooperation.

In my view a good opportunity to make steps towards each other could be a celebration of the day of proclamation of the Belarusian People's Republic. The date of March 25th 1918 is as important for Belarusian independence as July 3rd 1944. Belarusian public has spoken in favor of a joint celebration of this day and I do believe that such celebration could be a starting point to demonstrate the beginning of unity of Belarusians.

Our country loses billions of euros of assistance and investments for only one reason – its non-democratic political system

We can find a common solution for overcoming the confrontation within the society, and thus gain prosperity and development of our beloved Belarus.

Alexander Milinkevich,
Presidential candidate in the 2006 election,
Winner of the European Parliament's Sakharov Award
Minsk, February 7, 2007

Source: *Nasha Niva,* February 7, 2007

Dialogue is Lukashenka's Subterfuge

By Alexander Milinkevich,
2006 Presidential candidate

As long as Lukashenka does not release political prisoners and does not return to freedom of speech, concessions by the West will lead only to maintaining a brutal regime in the centre of Europe.

Several European politicians dream about a new approach to Belarus – they say – "wiser, more realistic". They speak about the necessity to change the European policy towards Minsk, working on a new plan according to which the West would stop trying to isolate the Belarusian dictator and would propose him a arrangement. In reality this would only be about allowing Lukashenka to stay in power, as an ally of the West, rather than of the Kremlin. This would create on the eastern border of Europe a kind of Azerbaijan.

Europe believes that it can carry out such a sly game because the might of Lukashenka has apparently significantly weakened. European politicians think that forced into a corner he now has a choice – deepening of the economic crisis and following its result – agreement to the status of marionette of the Kremlin or even throwing away the independence of Belarus – or political dialogue with Europe, taking forced steps in the democratisation of the country and in result – the support of Europe in neutralising the pressure of Russia.

Belarusians should not have any illusions – Europe is interested in building relations with the Minsk authorities that would guarantee its own interests – fighting illegal immigration, drugs, and above all the functioning of the Belarusian transit corridor. The problem of Belarus in minds of Europeans has become associated with their energy security, their comfort and their welfare. Some European politicians would accept such state of affairs even under the Lukashenka dictatorship – if it were under their control.

From his side, Lukashenka is trying to push the West into moving away from opposition to his dictatorship. He is threatening the perspective of the Russian border moving to Brest, which would mean the rebuilding of Russian military infrastructure as well as changes in Russia, which would not necessarily be welcomed by the West. Lukashenka is trying to create a belief that his "regime is the lesser evil than moving the border of Russia to Brest". Following this logic of Lukashenko, the West should recognise him as a full partner, develop political contacts, economic cooperation without insisting on such conditions as releasing political prisoners, securing political freedoms or remembering about human rights. This was clearly given to the recent interview in the German newspaper *Die Welt*.

In reality all European voices about the perspective of cooperation with Belarus are only needed by Lukashenka to maintain his personal power. He is trying to consolidate the governing elite, which, based on their own economic profits, has no intention to let into Belarus either the West or Russia. He is gaining a few extra percentage of support

from his electorate by playing the role of defender against the Russian oligarchs and their associates in the Kremlin. He is thinking that by flirting with Europe, he will persuade Russia to return to the old model of cooperation, in which Moscow will pay a solid price for Lukashenka to be its strategic ally.

At the same time, while the public opinion was paying attention to the Belarusian-Russian oil-gas epic, the political regime in our country became even more brutal. Activists of the democratic movement, opposition organisations, journalists, independent activists of trade unions are still repressed.

The natural question arises: isn't it logical that the Belarusian society, its pro-democratically thinking part, and especially those who were beaten or put in prison, or those who lost their loved ones, would take the "most realistic" approach to the Lukashenka dictatorship as a betrayal? The answer is clear.

In such situation, Europe, and above all the neighbour of Belarus, Poland, is making a mistake assuming that the tension in relations between the Lukashenka regime and Russia would become an impulse for the democratisation of Belarus. The EU should create a strategy of supporting the democratic change in Belarus, a strategy of cooperating with the pro-democratic part of the society - who is the only worthy partner for Europe. Regarding the declared intention of today of the Lukashenko regime to carry out dialogue with the EU, this should only be taken seriously following the fulfilment of many conditions. Above all he must release political prisoners, guarantee the freedom of speech, create conditions for freedom of assembly and development of political parties. He must carry out a real investigation in the cases of political disappearances and punish the guilty ones. He must stop repression against activists of opposition organisations.

Without fulfillment of these conditions any concessions of the West would only lead to the maintaining in the centre of Europe a brutal regime.

It is clear that in order to enter into concrete dialogue with the West, Lukashenka should decide to carry out changes in Belarus that would not only contradict his own interest but also the interests of his close attachment. That is why as long as Lukashenka is in power, the normalisation of relations between Minsk and Europe cannot be expected.

Source: www.3dway.org, March 2, 2007

QUOTES of QUARTER

"Those in the West must understand that our friendship with Russians stands above all. One shouldn't joke with what is holy."

LUKASHENKA, in an interview broadcast by Al Jazeera on March 1.

Young Belarusians Send Their Love To Europe

By Luke Allnutt

For years, young activists in Belarus have been sending Valentine's cards to Europe. And for years, they've been getting no replies. Since 1997, opposition-minded young people have gathered in Minsk on February 14 to show their support for joining the European Union. Their numbers this year in Minsk were small — probably several dozen — but the atmosphere was heavy with symbolism. An RFE/RL reporter in Minsk said that police detained five activists earlier on February 14 and cordoned off the central Liberty Square, although some activists broke through. Barys Haretski, an activist from the opposition youth group Youth Front (Malady Front), which is organizing this year's parade, said the event in Minsk's central Liberty Square would look like a theatrical show. "Activists will personify the countries of the EU, dressed in the costumes of these countries," he said. "They will form a burning circle. They will light these Bengal lights [a signal flare] and at a certain point the person representing Belarus will enter the circle. At that moment, the circle will turn into a burning heart. After that we plan to parade through the center of town stopping at European embassies." There, parade participants plan to drop off Valentine's cards.



In a Free Belarus Love is More Pleasant

Given President Lukashenka's recent comments in the Western press calling for greater dialogue with the EU, Haretski was hopeful. "The Youth Front does not consider this to be a day of romantic love where people gather to exchange kisses, but a true day of love for our country and love for Europe," he said. "We approach this holiday through the prism of love for Belarus and love for Europe and demand love, freedom, change and the inclusion of Belarus in the European community."

Last week, the Belarusian government appealed to foreign investors, hoping to attract up to $1 billion to make up for diminishing Russian subsidies. And on February 13 in Minsk, Lukashenka, receiving the credentials from a group of new foreign ambassadors, spoke of mutually beneficial cooperation with Europe. But European officials seem unconvinced that such comments reflect a genuine change of heart from a leadership that has long been staunchly anti-

Western. Bogdan Klich, chairman of the European Parliament's Delegation for Relations with Belarus, said he doesn't believe that "behind those political messages there is a real willingness of the authoritarian system to begin the road to democracy."

Recent events in Belarus tend to support Klich's view. On February 4, Belarusian security services broke up a meeting of the Youth Front, detaining many of the activists. And a week later, police and KGB officers rounded up 26 activists of the Association of Belarusian Students who were meeting at a private house near Minsk. These types of events will do little to ingratiate Belarus with the European Union.

The EU has made it plain to Minsk — start to democratize and we will help you. In November 2006, Brussels outlined what Belarus needed to do to receive Brussels' help. Despite Lukashenka's recent overtures, the European Commission's external-relations spokeswoman, Emma Udwin, said those requirements still stand. "The kind of things that we [the European Commission] are looking for are rather concrete. We would like to see the release of Mr. [Alyaksandr] Kazulin and other political figures, for example. That would be a very strong signal," Udwin said. "Cooperation with the Council of Europe, granting visas to OSCE representatives on freedom of the media, for example, or even actually approving our request to open a [European] Commission delegation in Minsk."

If Belarus did show some progress, Brussels says it would make travel to EU countries easier for Belarusians, increase trade cooperation, and offer Belarusian students scholarships at European universities. And with further democratic development, Belarus could move closer to the EU through gradual economic integration.

For now, though, the direction of Lukashenka's regime remains unclear. A president who has forged his career on Soviet nostalgia, he has suddenly started sending mixed signals. While attempting to woo Europe, Lukashenka has said he wishes to continue to be Russia's outpost in the West. And he is also fomenting closer ties with Iran at a time when that country is increasingly at odds with Europe and the United States.

RFE/RL Newsline, February 14, 2007

HISTORICAL DATES

February 1, 1661

Inhabitants of the city of **Mahilou** rose against the Muscovite occupying army. Assisted by troops of the Grand Duchy of Litva, they liberated their city for the duration of the 1654 war.

February 2, 1838

Birthdate of **Kastuś Kalinouski,** leader of the anti-Russian national uprising of 1863-1864.

March 21, 1840

Birthdate of **Francishak Bahushevich,** poet, lawyer and pioneer of the Belarusian national revival.



Kastuś Kalinouski

March 22, 1864

Kastuś Kalinouski, the leader of the anti-Russian uprising was executed by Russian czarist authorities, in Vilnia.

March 25, 1918

Belarus' Independence Day (Day of Freedom) — Belarusian Democratic Republic (BNR) was declared an independent state by the Executive Council of the First All-Belarusian Congress, in Miensk.

April 4, 1557

450th anniversary of birth of Leu Sapieha, a renowned statesman, chancellor of the Grand Duchy of Litva, and compiler of Litva's collection of laws - the Lithuanian Statute.



Chancellor Leu Sapieha

SPORTS

Belarusian Achievements in European Indoor Track and Field Championships:

- Gold medal in Women's 4x400 m. relay. (Jushchanka, Khlustova, S. Usovich, I. Usovich) Time: 3:27.83.
- Silver medal in Women's 400m. race. (I. Usovich). Time: 51,00 sec.
- Bronze medal in Men's Heptathlon (7 disciplines). (Andrej Krauchanka) - 6090 points.

A silver medal in World's Ski Championships, held in February 2007 in Sapporo, Japan.

- 19-year old Leanid Karniyenka of Belarus won second place in men's 15km. race.

ECONOMY

Belarus, Inc.: Cooking the Books

By Siarhej Karol

The new oil and gas deals with Russia will undermine the foundations of Belarus' economic success.

Moscow's decision to start charging Belarus world market prices for energy is one of the most dramatic events in the recent history of the former Soviet republic.

The natural gas deal agreed between Russia's Gazprom energy supplier and Belarus on 31 December means that Belarus' old, deeply discounted rate of less than $50 per 1,000 cubic meters will double in 2007 and continue to rise over the next five years to the price paid by Western European customers.

The new oil arrangement will also cost Belarus plenty. After Russia shut down the Druzhba pipeline, which supplies Belarus and several other countries with Russian oil, in early January, Minsk agreed to pay a duty of $53 per ton on Russian crude used in Belarusian refineries.

Until this month, Belarus probably saved around $4 billion to $5 billion per year on the difference between market energy prices and the discounted rates Russia charged, a sizeable share of its $30 billion national product. This was the main source of the famed stability of that unreformed economy. The sharp reversal of these terms does not yet mean the imminent collapse of the Belarusian economy and the Lukashenka regime with it. What it will do is shatter the myth of the "Belarusian economic miracle" and make plain what the Belarusian economy has always been – an unprofitable one-company enterprise surviving from extracting monopoly rent from its geographic position.

MADE IN THE USSR

To see why these events are so important, one must understand just how peculiar the Belarusian economy is.

Belarus is a rare case of a country whose economy is almost entirely artificial. Most countries' or regions' economies have evolved in line with local factors such as natural resources, land, labor, capital, or conditions that promoted the growth of entrepreneurship and industry. Until the 1940s, Belarus, too, was such a place, naturally evolving in the agricultural and transport, but not manufacturing, sectors.

After World War II, however, Soviet central planners picked Belarus to be the union's assembly line and chemical plant. Belarus became a specialist in turning parts and energy into finished goods. Far from natural resources and makers of the parts used in its assembly factories, Belarus was not a natural location for such a massive industrial complex. It would not have emerged in the conditions of a market economy and was only possible in the planned economy of the Soviet Union, when nobody expected it to break up. When the USSR suddenly collapsed, the economy of Belarus, one of the most advanced among the Soviet republics, also became the most vulnerable. This predicament, well understood by Alyaksandr Lukashenka, became the dominant factor that determined the new nation's post-Soviet development.

Politically, the postwar years that transformed a humble peasant land into an industrial powerhouse became the golden age in eyes of many Belarusians. A curious national identity began to take shape at this time – an identity that combines a sense of proud difference from the country's Slavic neighbors with pride in belonging to a non-Western brotherhood.

The purely economic effect of the Soviet industrialization drive was even more important. Belarus' trade dependency, or the average of its exports and imports as a percentage of GDP, is about 60 percent. An economy with a trade dependency like that must ensure that its exports increase in line with imports. When the country's jury-rigged economic engine starts to misfire, though, incomes suffer, unemployment rises, and unrest begins. This is precisely what happened in the early 1990s to bring Lukashenka to power. Elected on a wave of discontent, he knew that his political survival depended on his ability to maintain the advantageous deals with Russia by any means. This required his personal control over the entire value chain, from purchase of materials to sale of output. Accomplishing that has not been hard: also thanks to Soviet industrial planners, the entire economy is represented by a handful of very large enterprises, organized into ministries whose directors report to the president. These enterprises, including Belneftekhim (petroleum and chemicals), Minsk Tractor Works, Minsk Automobile, the Belaz heavy trucks works, and the Azot chemicals concern, employ hundreds of thousands and produce more than four-fifths of the Belarusian GDP. Belarus' economy is a Fortune 500–size holding company, with the president as CEO

GROWING THE COMPANY

The former state farm manager–turned president Lukashenka proved a talented business magnate. He personally set salary levels, arranged credit, and appointed and removed line managers during hot-tempered conference calls. But his main achievement was the remarkable deals he struck with the country-company's main suppliers and customers.

Belarus Inc. went through two distinct stages. In the first, from the mid-1990s until around 2003, it restored its Soviet roots. Exports and imports increased, incomes stabilized, albeit with some trade deficit, and investment was minimal. Just as before 1991, imports and exports were mainly to Russia. Fueled by subsidized gas and oil acquired at the same prices paid by their Russian competitors, state-controlled Belarusian factories avoided much of the turmoil the Russian economy endured and maintained a degree of competitiveness in the Russian and eastward trade.

Starting from around 2001, and gaining full speed by 2004, Stage 2 kicked in. Although exports and imports, as well as GDP, continued to rise, things were changing. The positive trade balance with Russia reversed and has continued to fall, as goods made in Belarus were no longer valuable enough to offset the price of inputs, due to both

the rising cost of inputs and the increasing competitiveness of goods made in Russia and other countries, in the eyes of Russian consumers. Exports to the West, however, increased dramatically thanks to refining duty-free Russian crude and reselling it to the West at ever-climbing market prices.

The second stage proved much more lucrative than the first: oil revenues were shared between the profits to Belneftekhim, the refining conglomerate, and duties to the state. The state budget could then be tapped to subsidize other, loss-making, subsidiaries of Belarus Inc. GDP grew at record pace, investment increased, incomes rose and the myth of the Belarusian economic miracle was born.

TOLL BRIDGE BETWEEN EAST AND WEST

The myth ended in the two weeks after New Year's Eve, when the discounts on Russian gas were reduced and oil discounts eliminated. The new trade terms with Russia are carving away at the foundations of Belarus' successful trade models. The gas price hike hits the manufacturing sector, making it even less competitive in the Russian and CIS market, where most of its products go and where it can compete only on price. The new oil deal will slice away most of Belneftekhim's profits – the $53-per-ton duty nearly cancels the $60- to $70-per-ton profit the refiner used to enjoy thanks to duty-free crude and means a dramatic loss of tax income to the state budget. In addition, the deal obliges Minsk to hand over to Russia the bulk of the customs duties it collects on refined oil products made from Russian crude.

It is probably too early to make a reliable forecast of the economic, and hence political, effects on Belarus. In the short term, the country does not necessarily stand to lose the fiscal windfall the Russian subsidies provided. Even if the ownership of the gas and oil pipelines passes to Russia entirely, the country still has the main source of its bargaining power – sovereignty over its land, which allows it to impose customs duties or transport tariffs on gas and oil passing through its territory. Since about 20 percent of Russia's gas and half of its oil supplies to Europe pass through Belarus, this is a strong bargaining position, at least until Russia develops alternative routes like the Baltic Sea gas pipeline direct to Germany.

If Minsk manages to avoid provoking Moscow into imposing import tariffs on all Belarusian goods in the future, it can continue to enjoy what amounts to Russian subsidies to its industries.

However, the effects of the new trade terms will still be significant and could extend beyond the economic sphere.

Their main result would be to replace price subsidies to working factories with direct cash transfers into the state budget. This was already evident in the second stage of Lukashenka's Belarus Inc., when the trade balance with Russia began to deteriorate with Belarusian products increasingly unwanted there, leading to a shift in Russian support for the Belarusian economy from money to enterprises to the direct inflow into just one enterprise, energy refining, and directly into the state budget in the form of customs duties on refined products.

On the gas side, the government has already said it will pass on the price increase to enterprises. On the oil side, Belarus will receive some duty income from the Russian crude, but the refineries will become much less profitable.

As a result, the losses in the productive sector would become apparent, and the phenomenon economists call "rent seeking" become more and more entrenched. Rent seeking means getting value out of economic transactions without producing more goods and services. For Belarus, that means the economy will become dependent on extraction of payments for gas and oil flowing through its territory, a literal version of the popular vision of Belarus as a "bridge between East and West," a toll bridge in this case.

A rent-seeking nation is typically associated with a culture of entitlement and with falling productivity as money flows into the state budget although no value has been created. Middle Eastern oil states are the classic example. Such states are rarely governed by democrats. In Belarus, as money keeps flowing into state coffers it could mean further strengthening of the president's position as distributor of the proceeds.

That Belarus Inc. is unprofitable is evident from the balance of payments: the country's trade deficit is roughly equal to 5 percent of its GDP, higher than the global average.

This means the country is losing that amount a year in profits from its import-export business, even with the energy discounts. If the energy were purchased at market prices, this deficit would be 20 percent or more. Revenue from exports is simply not enough to cover the costs, including the salary raises promised and delivered by the president.

Belarus could still set its sights on becoming a successful trading economy run by authoritarian means – similarly trade-dependent Singapore or Malaysia come to mind. But knowing the ways of the Belarusian leader, unless Russia finds the stomach for a total trade war, Belarus can probably go on for some time before its economy needs a complete overhaul.

Source: TransitionsOnLine, 22 January 2007

QUOTES of QUARTER

"Lukashenka is one of the outstanding leaders on the post-Soviet space."

IGOR PIVOVAROV, the spokesman of a new political movement in Russia "Our candidate for the Presidency of the Russian Federation in 2008 — Aleksandr G. Lukashenko."

"All in Russia are saying that Lukashenka will get what he deserves, quite soon."

SERGEI KARAGANOV, the head of the Russian Council on Foreign and Defense Policy, commenting on Lukashenka's interview broadcast by Moscow Ekho on February 8

Russia Changes Terms of Oil Supply to Belarus

By Vladimir Socor

On January 12 in Moscow, Prime Ministers Mikhail Fradkov of Russia and Syarhey Sidorski of Belarus inked agreements on oil supplies and transit, eliminating part of Russia's hidden subsidies to Belarus. By the same token, the agreement seems to preclude actions by Belarus that would provoke Russia to stop pumping oil to Europe via Belarus, as Transneft did during the second week of January. Initial reports do not fully clarify which parts of the agreements are final and binding and which are temporary or merely initialed, rather than finally signed.

Moscow agreed to begin negotiations on oil supplies to Belarus only after the latter had given up the transit tax, which it introduced on January 1 for Russian oil en route to Europe through the Belarus section of the Druzhba system. Minsk lifted the tax on January 10, which it had been unable to enforce because Russia's Transneft interrupted the flow to Europe.

Under the January 12 agreements, Russia introduces an export duty on crude oil to Belarus at $53 per ton at Russia's western border, effective from January 1 and applicable to the crude earmarked for refining in Belarus.

The export of Belarus-refined products to third countries shall be taxed at the "western" borders of Belarus as follows: Russia to receive 70% of the tax proceeds in 2007, 80% in 2008, and 85% in 2009, with Belarus correspondingly receiving 30%, 20%, and 15%, respectively, in those years.

Russia supplied 20 million tons of oil for consumption and is scheduled to supply the same amount in 2007. Crude oil to meet domestic requirements for refined products will continue to be supplied duty-free by Russia in 2007 to the tune of 6 million tons. The Russian export duty applies the other 14 million tons, the refined products that are to be exported.

Belarus extracts 2 million tons of oil annually in the country. It now has the option to export it with a duty of $180 per ton or refining it in the country. Russian officials are to be stationed on the "external border of the [Russia-Belarus] Union State" to record the flow of crude oil and oil products. Moscow reserves the right to raise its export duty on crude oil again to $181 if Minsk does not abide by the arrangement on sharing the tax revenue on its oil product exports.

The compromise is clearly weighted in Moscow's favor on both counts. At least since 1995, Russian crude oil deliveries to Belarus were duty-free, enabling Belarus refineries to export oil derivatives at high prices from low-cost Russian crude. Since 2001, moreover, Belarus was taking 100% of the tax proceeds from the export of those oil products to third countries. Most recently, however, Moscow demanded an 85% share of those tax proceeds, effective immediately. On January 1, 2007, Moscow introduced a $181 tax on crude oil supplies to Belarus, ostensibly to recoup some $3.5 billion in annual revenue hitherto lost to the Russian budget.

Effective that same day, Minsk introduced a transit service tax of $45 per ton of Russian oil headed for European Union countries, reckoning with compensatory annual revenue of $3.5 billion for the transit service. Belarus had all along provided the transit service gratis and will apparently continue to do so, after Moscow threatened to counter-retaliate by closing Russia's markets to Belarus' industrial exports.

According to government officials from both sides, Russia's budget stands to earn $1.1 billion in 2007 through the export duty on crude oil supplies to Belarus. By the same token, the Belarus budget stands to earn some $1.5 billion in 2007 through the export tax on Belarus-refined products from Russian crude. However, the Belarus tax share is set to decline year-by-year; and the cost of crude supplied to Belarus is rising substantially through the Russian customs duty, deeply cutting into Belarus' profit margin from the export of derivatives.

The negotiations in Moscow continued late at night in the Soviet tradition and came to closure only after another telephone conversation between Presidents Vladimir Putin and Alexander Lukashenka — a follow-up to their January 10 telephone talk, which launched these negotiations on an emergency basis.

The Russian side realized that it did not hold all the cards, once the European Union reacted strongly against Russia's interruption of oil supplies via Belarus. Some Russian officials including Fradkov and — most emphatically — Economic Development and Trade Minister German Gref openly acknowledged that Russia's reputation as a reliable supplier to Europe has again been undermined through the stoppage of oil deliveries through Belarus. Alluding also to the January 2006 gas crisis over Ukraine, these Russian officials declared that such situations must never be repeated. Russia's reputation in Europe must now be rebuilt, Fradkov and Gref declared even as the negotiations with the Belarus delegation were in progress.

On January 11 in Brussels, a special meeting of the EU's expert group composed of representatives of the 27 member countries and EU agencies called on Russia and Belarus to remove all remaining impediments to transit and ensure reliable supplies of oil to EU countries. Russia had recommenced deliveries partly on January 10 and fully on January 11. The first volume to be pumped was the 79,000 tons that Homel-Transnafta — operator of the Druzhba pipeline's Belarus section -- had impounded in lieu of the Russian transit tax after January 4.

Source: Eurasian Daily Monitor, January 15, 2007

QUOTES of QUARTER

"Let us start by freeing political prisoners, let us invite international experts and accept their mission's conclusions regarding the facts about (the prisoners) actions."

RENE van der LINDEN, the Chairman of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe while in Minsk on January 17.

Belarusians Abroad

BELGIUM:
The Prospects and Challenges For EU-Belarus Relations

was the title of a conference, organized by the Belarus Working Group at the College of Europe, Bruges, Belgium.

The conference was held on February 27, 2007 at he College of Europe in Bruges.

The morning program consisted of:

opening remarks by Dr. Michelle Chang (Lecturer, College of Europe), and the keynote speech on "Belarus and the European Union," delivered by Dr. Janusz Onyszkiewicz (Deputy Speaker of the European Parliament).

The afternoon program consisted of a public panel discussion with following speakers:

• Dr. Joerg Forbrig (German Marshall Fund of the United States), moderator and an academic with expertise on Belarus

• Ex-diplomat with expertise in the area, Dr. Hans-Georg Wieck (former head of the OSCE mission in Belarus) on: "The prospects for democracy in Belarus"

• Civil servant from the EU institutions, Ms. Claude Veron-Reville (Belarus Desk Officer at DG RELEX), on: "The prospects for Belarus in the ENP"

• A business representative, Mr. Filip Vanderbroele (Honorary Consul of Belgium in Belarus), on: The challenges faced by Western businesses in Belarus."

Closing remarks by Uladzislau Bielavusau and Martin Köhring from the Belarus Working group were followed by a reception and the opening of a Photo Exhibition on Belarus by Andrei Liankevich, a Belarusian photojournalist.

About the Belarus Working Group

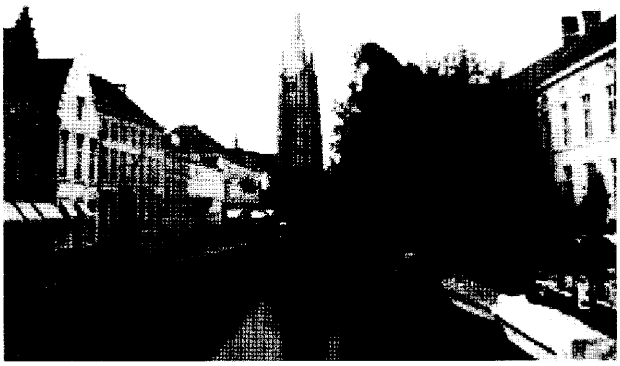
The "College of Europe Working Group" was set up at the College's Natolin campus in Warsaw in 2005 in order to support small civil society initiatives in Belarus. The working group implemented a "European Belarus Project" in 2005 and 2006.

In order to further contribute to this initiative a branch of the working group has been set up at the College's Bruges campus. The branch will mainly focus on raising awareness about the political and social situation in Belarus among College students as well on the establishment of cooperation with a network of NGO campaigners, activists and specialists on Belarus — both within the Brussels context and in Belarus itself.

Bearing in mind the geographic proximity of the EU to Belarus and the EU's political weight in the European framework, we acknowledge the importance of Belarus as a potential participant within the framework of the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP). The promotion of ideals and principles of democracy, human rights in its political and social dimensions and the rule of law stand at the very foundations of the European Union. Thus, we hope to contribute to the creation of civil society structures in Belarus.

In pursuing these goals, we would like to use the exceptional academic experience and tradition of the College of Europe as a meeting place of young Europeans. Focusing more on Belarusian issues will, in our opinion, ultimately serve the creation of indispensable bounds among our societies, strengthening European security, solidarity, cultural diversity, and contributing to the promotion of European values among our Belarusian friends.

As part of our project we are organizing a one-day conference to take place in Bruges in February 2007. Our partner for this project is the "Office for a Democratic Belarus," an NGO based in Brussels. This conference aims at bringing together interested policy-makers, academics and activists to discuss the role of Belarus in Europe and opportunities for democracy promotion. The conference will also be the culmination of our networking efforts and can thus serve as a catalyst for further cooperation in this field, especially in the EU context.



The picturesque town of Bruges

Brussels:
A Study Day of a European Parliament Group on Belarus

On February 8, 2007 the Group on Belarus of the European Parliament's European People's Party (Christian Democrats) and European Democrats (EPP-ED) held a special study day on Belarusian affairs.

It was attended by Europarliament's leading officials:

Hans-Gert Pöttering, President of the European Parliament , **Jacek-Sariush-Wolski**, Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, and **Bogdan Klich**, Chairman of the EP delegation for relations with Belarus.

The Council of Europe was represented by **Rene van der Linden,** chairman of the Council's Parliamentary Assembly, and **Helga Schmid**, director of Council's Policy Unit on Belarus.

The latest political landscape in Belarus was described in speeches by **Aliaksandar Milinkevich**, the former United Democratic Opposition's presidential candidate, **Vintsuk Viachorka**, chairman of the Belarus Popular Front, and **Zhanna Litvin**a, president of the Belarusian Association of Journalists.

Very interesting facts and suggestions concerning a positive role of Ukraine in democratization of Belarus were presented in a speech by **Borys Tarasiuk**, Ukraine's former foreign minister.

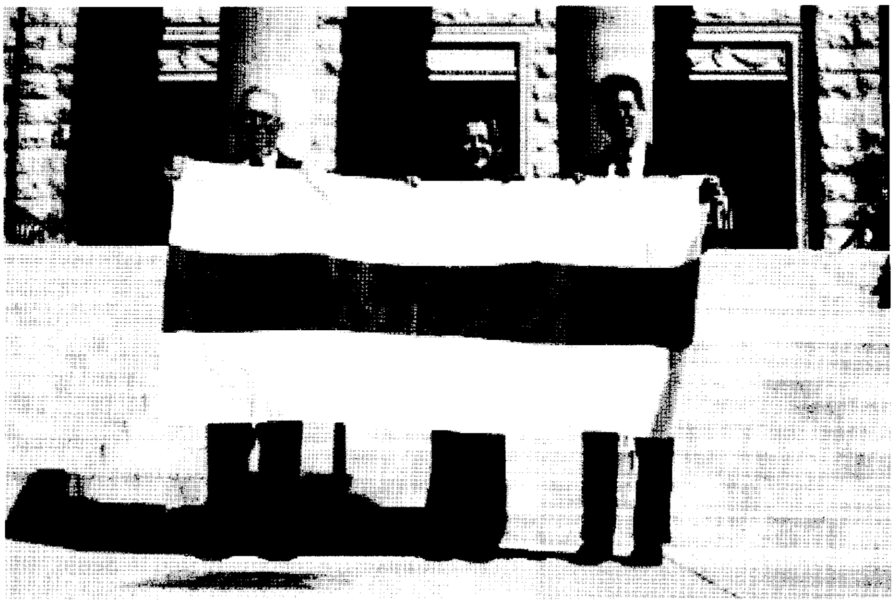
Over 50 members of Belarusian diaspora civic organizations, primarily those based in Belgium, also participated in the event. During a pause between sessions, the Belarusian film director, **Yury Khashchavatski,** screened his documentary film "Ploshcha" (the Square).

It should be noted, that Belarusian language was not listed among the 9 working languages of the study day, formally dealing with issues concerning Belarus.

Replying to a complaint from the audience, **Aldis Kuskis,** Europarliament's vice-chairman of the delegation for Relations with Belarus, declared that in the future Belarusian will be a working language of similar meetings, once Belarus expresses its desire to join the European Union.

Source: www.bez.unija.info. Reporter: Raman Kavalchuk.

Center for Belarusian Studies in US



Leading Board Members of the Center at the Southwestern College in Winfield, Kansas
Co-chair Amb. David Swartz, the first US Ambassador to Belarus, Vice-chair Dr.Maria Paula Survilla, a Music Professor at Wartburg Colleg in Waverly, Iowa and Co-chair Dr. Andy Sheppard, the Academic Vice President at Southwestern College.

The Board of Directors of the Center held its first international teleconference on May 8, 2006.

"Southwestern College is proud to host a truly independent center for the study of Belarus. The board of directors for the Center is a tremendous mix of both talent and expertise that inspires great confidence in the Center's activities. As such, there is every reason to think that the Center will serve to preserve, promote, and sustain interest in all aspects of Belarus for generations to come." Andy Sheppard

PRAGUE: 2006 Election Exhibit

A photo exhibition entitled "Election without a Choice" opened in Prague on March 19, 2007, under the sponsorship of the former Czech president Vaclav Havel and the chancellor of Charles university, prof. Vaclav Hampl.

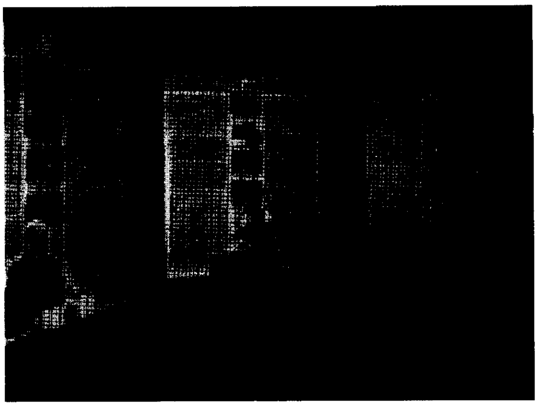
The exhibition deals primarily with dramatic events after the manipulated Belarus' presidential elections in March of 2006, when thousands of people demanded new and fair elections and for their protests were arrested and imprisoned by the Lukashenka regime.

Tha atmosphere of the March 2006 protests were captured by the Belarusian photographers Andrej Lankevich and Julia Darashkevich from the opposition weekly *Nasha Niva*, and by the Czech photographer Jakub Dospiva .

They photographed the events in the tent city, built by young oppositioners on October Square in the ecnter of Minsk. They also documented the police attack , that dispersed the tent city and resulted in carting hundreds of demonstrators to a prison detention center.

The snapshots are accompanied by authentic notes by an independent Belarusian newspaperwoman, Darja Kastsenka, who later posted them on a Russian web site, under the title "The March Diaries."

"I am writing these lines on March 22, at 0:48 AM. During the last two days I had altogether 2 hours of sleep. An hour ago I was relased from the police station. I still don't know where is my brother, who was bringing food to the people in the square," she wrote. Workers of the foreign TV crews made her texts famous throughout the world.



The exhibition was organized by students of Prague's Charles University, with support by the University and the former Czech President Vaclav Havel.

Prague will host the exhibition until April 30, 2007. Subsequently it will be moved to Brno and other Czech cities.

The photographic aspect will be supplemented by regular showings of documentary films on Belarus that will be followed with discussions with the guest public.

Source: www.svobodne-belorusko.wz.cz

NEWS BRIEFS

The source of items in the NEWS BRIEFS section is the RFE/RL Newsline, unless otherwise indicated.

1. POLITICAL OPPOSITION

Janury 18, 2007

BELARUSIAN INTELLECTUALS DEMAND RELEASE OF IMPRISONED SCIENTIST

Several Belarusian intellectuals have demanded the immediate release of Kanstantsin Lukashou, a researcher with the Geochemistry and Geophysics Institute of the National Academy of Sciences, who has been imprisoned in Minsk since December 19, BelaPAN reported on January 17. "We regard the prosecution of Kanstantsin Lukashou as the authorities' reaction to his active civil position, which manifested itself in the researcher's running in parliamentary elections in 2004 and the development by Lukashou of an efficient strategy for the election of pro-democratic candidates to local soviets" the intellectuals said in a statement. Lukashou was charged with resisting arrest when he picked up his half-brother and oppositionist Vyachaslau Siuchyk from a hospital after the March 2006 protests. Siuchyk's mother, Halina Siuchyk, said her son's case is evidence that any person who has independent views can be subjected to politically motivated criminal prosecution

February 1, 2007

BELARUSIAN OPPOSITION LEADER CAUTIONS EUROPE AGAINST ENTERING DIALOGUE WITH LUKASHENKA

Former Belarusian opposition presidential candidate Alyaksandr Milinkevich said at a meeting of the German Bundestag's Committee on Foreign Affairs in Berlin on January 31 that Europe will not manage to bring a democratic change in Belarus through dialogue with President Alyaksandr Lukashenka, BelaPAN reported, quoting Milinkevich's press service. "The belief of some European politicians that Europe could reach agreement with Lukashenka and bring a democratic change to Belarus thanks to him is naive and dangerous. Lukashenka will use all contacts for the sole purpose of preserving his hold on power," Milinkevich reportedly said in Berlin. Milinkevich stressed that Europe should engage in dialogue with the Belarusian authorities only on condition that they release all political prisoners and stop the crackdown on the independent media. .

February 8, 2007

BELARUSIAN OPPOSITION LEADER CALLS ON PRESIDENT TO MEND FENCES WITH EUROPE

Former opposition presidential candidate Alyaksandr Milinkevich has called on President Alyaksandr Lukashenka in an open letter to establish good and friendly relations with the European Union, RFE/RL's Belarus Service reported on February 7. Milinkevich also stressed that Minsk will be invited for talks with the EU only if it engages in a dialogue with the opposition. In a recent interview, Milinkevich pledged to help Minsk obtain aid from the EU if the Belarusian government embarked on a path of democratization. "If the authorities start fulfilling certain conditions, then both Europe and we, pro-democracy forces, are open for cooperation. I'm ready for joint, coordinated actions, but the regime should first start releasing political pris-

oners, give freedom to the media, political parties, and nongovernmental organizations," Milinkevich's press office quoted him as saying.

February 15, 2007

FORMER BELARUSIAN PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE REFUSES TO PARTICIPATE IN OPPOSITION CONGRESS

Alyaksandr Milinkevich, the candidate of the united opposition for the March 2006 presidential election, said in a statement on February 14 that he does not intend to participate in the congress of pro-democratic forces being prepared by the opposition for March 17-18), BelaPAN and RFE/RL's Belarus Service reported. Milinkevich said he does not want to participate in " internal squabbling" adding that the Political Council of United Pro-Democratic Forces has failed to unify opposition parties following the March 2006 election. "Instead of organizing joint work, some party leaders began to compete for leadership and started months-long preparations for the congress," Milinkevich said in the statement. Milinkevich told RFE/RL on February 14 that he personally objects to the idea of a rotating chairmanship in the coalition of opposition forces that is expected to be approved at the March congress. " I am not afraid of competition and am ready to enter the struggle for leadership [in the opposition] once again," Milinkevich said." But when the coalition decided that there would be a rotation [of leaders], I immediately said that I am not interested. Because rotation means that there is no leader and that all are leaders at the same time. Everyone becomes a leader for a few months and is subsequently replaced. You can be a leader once in every three years. [But] you cannot beat the dictatorship with such an unclenched fist."

February 21, 2007

BELARUSIANS PROTEST CONSTRUCTION OF CHURCH COMMEMORATING RUSSIAN GENERAL

The Batskaushchyna (Fatherland) World Association of Belarusians has petitioned the Belarusian authorities against the ongoing construction of an Orthodox church in the city of Kobryn, southwestern Belarus, BelaPAN reported on February 20. The church is expected to be named after Russian military commander Aleksandr Suvorov (1729-1800) who helped suppress the 1794 Polish national liberation revolt led by Belarusian-born Polish and American hero Thaddeus Kosciusko. The petition, signed also by members of the Belarusian Language Society and the Union of Belarusian Writers, was sent to Prime Minister Syarhey Sidorski and Minsk and Slutsk Metropolitan Filaret, head of the Belarusian Exarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church. " Crimes against the Belarusian people were committed under the command of Suvorov. Batskaushchyna is against the construction of the monument that will become the symbolic justification of the bloodshed," Batskaushchyna Deputy Chairwoman Alena Makouskaya told BelaPAN.

March 2, 2007

BELARUSIAN OPPOSITION LEADER WARNS AGAINST 'REORIENTATION' TOWARD EAST

Former opposition presidential candidate Alyaksandr Milinkevich on March 1 reiterated that he will take part in the upcoming congress of democratic forces in Belarus only if the congress decides to elect a single opposition leader, RFE/RL's Belarus Service reported. Last month, Milinkevich refused to participate in the congress planned for mid-March, saying he objects to the idea of a rotating chairmanship in the coalition of opposition forces that has been proposed for approval at this forum. Milinkevich on March 1 also repeated his former charge that the procedures for selecting delegates to the congress are nontransparent. " Those delegates to the congress whom we have today will most likely decide on the reorientation of Belarusian democratic forces toward the East," Milinkevich said. " Therefore, I am in favor of reconsidering those who have been given the right to go to the congress."

March 5, 2007

IMPRISONED BELARUSIAN OPPOSITIONIST RE-ELECTED AS PARTY LEADER

The opposition Belarusian Social Democratic Party (BSDP) reelected Alyaksandr Kazulin as its leader at a convention in Minsk on March 4, BelaPAN reported. There were no other nominees for the post. Kazulin, rector of Belarusian State University between 1996 and 2003, was elected chairman of the BSDP in July 2005. He was a candidate in Belarus' 2006 presidential election. Kazulin was arrested during a police crackdown on a peaceful postelection demonstration on March 25, 2006, and subsequently sentenced to 5 1/2 years in a correctional institution on charges widely believed to be politically motivated. He went on hunger strike from October 20 to December 11, 2006, to protest what he called the illegal reelection of President Alyaksandr Lukashenka to a third term and to draw the UN Security Council's attention to the situation in Belarus. He reportedly lost more than 30 kilograms during the protest. The jail administration has exempted Kazulin from work until April and put him on a special diet as he recovers from his fast.

March 16, 2007

SOME OPPOSITIONISTS REFUSE TO ATTEND THE OSCE WORKSHOP

Opposition politician Mikhail Marynich told Belapan that he turned down an invitation to attend the OSCE workshop in Minsk because of the government's ongoing oppression of the opposition. " I think that it's immoral to participate in the workshop when politicians Alyaksandr Kazulin, Pavel Sevyarynets, Mikalay Statkevich, and others are in prison; when politicians are arrested ahead of the workshop and young activists are pressured and persecuted," Marynich said. Former Deputy Foreign Minister and current opposition activist Andrey Sannikau did not participate in the OSCE workshop, either. " It is immoral to participate in events whose format was determined by the authorities," Sannikau told RFE/RL's Belarus Service. " This seminar was directed not toward promoting dialogue but toward recognizing the regime.... I know that after Uta Zapf's departure, the authorities will imprison [opposition activists Vintsuk] Vyachorka and [Vyachaslau] Siuchyk, there will be other political prisoners, and this will come as a result of the work of Uta Zapf and her group," Sannikau added. Meanwhile, Zapf told Belapan that the OSCE is planning to hold another workshop in Minsk in the fall. Zapf stressed that the EU attitude to Belarus will largely depend on how the ruling regime treats political prisoners. " I think it's very important that [the authorities] release at least a couple of political prisoners," she added, mentioning in particular Kazulin, who is serving a 5 1/2 year prison term.

March 19, 2007

BELARUSIAN OPPOSITION REPORTEDLY AGREES TO HOLD CONGRESS IN APRIL

Six opposition parties and a group of small business owners on March 17 agreed to hold the Second Congress of Pro-Democratic Forces on April 21-22, BelaPAN reported, quoting Alyaksandr Bukhvostau, chairman of the organizing committee for the congress. A statement announcing the date of the congress is expected to be signed on March 19. Bukhvostau said that the signatories of the statement will participate in the congress, adding that it will be open for signing by other political groups and nongovernmental organizations. The March 17 meeting was not, however, attended by former opposition presidential candidate Alyaksandr Milinkevich, who told Reuters that he does not want to have anything to do with this congress. " This will be a congress of party groups and not of democratic forces as a whole. If leaders at the top do not want real unity, I will organize it from the bottom," Milinkevich added.

2. ECONOMY

January 3, 2007

BELARUS, RUSSIA SIGN LAST-MINUTE GAS ACCORD

On December 31, 2006, in Moscow, two minutes before the expiration of the previous contract for natural-gas supplies, Belarus and Gazprom signed a new deal securing Russian gas supplies to Belarus and Russian gas transit across Belarus for 2007-2011, Belarusian and Russian media reported. Under the new contract, Belarus is to pay $100 for 1,000 cubic meters in 2007 compared with $46.68 in the previous 2 1/2 years. The gas price for Belarus is to gradually increase to the European market level by 2011: 67 percent of the level in 2008, 80 percent in 2009, 90 percent in 2010, and 100 percent in 2011. The two sides also agreed that the price of transit via Belarus through Belarus' pipelines will increase from $0.75 in 2006 to $1.45 for 1,000 cubic meters per 100 kilometers and will not change during these five years. Gazprom also agreed to pay $2.5 billion for its 50 percent stake in Beltranshaz, Belarus' gas-distribution network, in equal installments during the following four years.

January 3, 2007

BELARUS TO RAISE GAS, ELECTRICITY PRICES FOR CORPORATE CUSTOMERS

First Deputy Prime Minister Uladzimir Syamashka told journalists in Minsk on January 2 that the cost of gas for Belarusian companies will soon be increased to $150-$153 per 1,000 cubic meters, RFE/RL's Belarus Service reported. He added that electricity rates for corporate customers will grow by 54 percent and heat tariffs by 55 percent. According to Syamashka, the annual increase in housing and utility payments for the population in 2007 will amount to some $5-$6.

January 18, 2007

BELARUSIAN GOVERNMENT SETS EXPORT DUTY ON CRUDE OIL, PETROLEUM PRODUCTS

The Belarusian government issued a directive January 13 setting the export duty on petroleum products and crude oil, BelaPAN reported on January 17. The government-set custom duty on the export of crude oil amounts to $180 per ton, and that on petroleum products ranges from $72 to $134 per ton. The directive came days after Belarus and Russia reached agreement on Russian oil supplies. Russia lowered its export duty on oil to Belarus from $180 to $53 per ton and Belarus pledged to pay 70 percent of the export duty it receives for refined products.

January 25, 2007

BELARUS TO ADJUST 2007 BUDGET AFTER OIL, GAS-PRICE HIKES

Finance Minister Mikalay Korbut has informed President Alyaksandr Lukashenka about planned budgetary adjustments in connection with recent energy-price hikes, Belapan reported on January 24, quoting official sources. According to Korbut, the price hikes will not entail a revision of budgetary decisions concerning the alleviation of the tax burden, the prioritization of social programs, the modernization of production facilities, and the establishment of new manufacturing enterprises. Korbut said that the budget will be adjusted to increase projected revenues by 900 billion rubles ($420 million) and expenditures by 1.3 trillion rubles ($607 million). The 2007 budget bill passed by the Belarusian legislature in December projected consolidated budget revenues at 40.4 trillion rubles ($18.8 billion) and spending at 41.8 trillion rubles ($19.5 billion), with a deficit equal to 1.5 percent of the country's gross domestic product (GDP).

January 30, 2007

UTILITY TARIFFS IN BELARUS GO UP

The Belarusian government on January 29 resolved to raise gas and electricity tariffs for the population by 20 percent as of January 1, RFE/RL's Belarus Service reported. Heating bills for the population will increase by 12 percent.

January 31, 2007

BELARUS TO RECEIVE RUSSIAN OIL AT 2006 PRICE

The Belarusian petrochemical concern Belnaftakhim has signed an accord with a number of Russian oil companies on oil deliveries in 2007, Belapan and RFE/RL's Belarus Service reported on January 30. The price of Russian oil for Belarus in February will be some $240 per ton, that is, roughly the same as Belarus paid last year. This price will include the oil export duty of $53 per ton introduced by Russia earlier this month, meaning that the duty will actually be paid by Russian oil suppliers. According to *Kommersant*, the deal will be profitable for Russian oil companies even after they pay the new export duty. " The Belarusian government and [our] authoritarian leader [Alyaksandr] Lukashenka have shifted [the Russian oil export duty] onto Russian oligarchs. We have fooled them — [Russian Prime Minister Mikhail] Fradkov and [Russian President Vladimir] Putin. They have done nothing to us," Belarusian independent economic expert Leanid Zaika commented on the 2007 oil supply deal to RFE/RL. Belarus is to receive 21.5 million tons of crude oil from Russia in 2007, the same amount as last year.

February 6, 2007

BELARUS INCREASES OIL TRANSIT FEES FOR RUSSIA BY ONE-THIRD

The Belarusian Economy Ministry's website on February 5 published a government resolution increasing tariffs for Russian oil transit via Belarusian pipelines to Europe as of February 15. The increase in the tariffs, which have been unchanged since 1996, will raise the transit price for oil bound for Germany and Poland to $3.5 from $2.6 per ton of oil, or by 34.6 percent. Tariffs to Hungary, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, and Ukraine will rise to $1.5 from $1.14 per ton of oil, or by 31.6 percent. The ministry said the latest fees are based on the rates charged by Russian pipeline monopoly Transneft on Russian soil.

.March 1 , 2007

BELARUSIAN PRIME MINISTER SAYS PRIVATIZATION WON'T BE 'DIRT CHEAP'

Syarhey Sidorski told journalists in Minsk on February 28 that if stakes in Belarusian enterprises are offered for sale, they will be sold at market prices, Belapan reported. " If someone wants to buy Belarusian enterprises dirt cheap, it won't happen," Sidorski said. " For instance, we were told that Beltranshaz [Belarus' gas pipeline network] costs $300 million, but the Dutch bank ABN AMRO estimated its assets at $5 billion," he added. Sidorski's comments follow last month's media reports that the Belarusian government has drawn up a list of large industrial enterprises, stakes in which may soon be offered for sale to foreign investors. The planned privatizations are reportedly intended to ensure an export surplus in Belarus' foreign trade in 2007. The list of companies include the Babruysk-based tire company Belshyna, the Navapolatsk and Mazyr oil refineries, three petrochemical companies in Navapolatsk, Hrodna, and Mahilyou, the Hrodna-based Azot fertilizer plant, the Beltelekom telephone company, and the Minsk Automobile Plant (MAZ).

February 7, 2007

BELARUS WANTS TO BORROW $2.7 BILLION FROM CHINA

The Belarusian Economy Ministry has prepared a draft presidential decree to draw loans from China, Belapan reported on March 6, quoting Economy Minister Mikalay Zaychanka. Zaychanka added that a total of 37 projects worth $2.7 billion are expected to be financed using Chinese credit lines from 2007 through 2010. Last month, the Belarusian government asked Moscow for a $1.5 billion stabilization loan to cushion the effects of the gas-and-oil price hikes earlier this year.

February 23, 2007

BELARUS SEEKS $1.5 BILLION LOAN FROM RUSSIA

The Belarusian government has asked Moscow for a $1.5 billion stabilization loan to cushion the effects of the gas-and-oil price hikes earlier this year, BelaPAN reported on February 22, citing official information sources. " The Russian government is ready to consider the loan. The volume of the loan and its terms are a subject of negotiations" *RIA Novosti* quoted Russian Economic Development and Trade Minister German Gref as saying later the same day. In January, Belarus' foreign debt amounted to $838 million, with the established upper limit of $2 billion at the end of 2007.

3. REGIME ACTIONS and STATEMENTS

Jan. 11, 2007

BELARUSIAN PRESIDENT APPOINTS HIS SON TO SECURITY COUNCIL

Belarusian President Lukashenka issued an edict on January 5 appointing his son Viktar Lukashenka as a member of Belarus' Security Council, Belapan reported on January 10. The Security Council is headed by the president and consists of several senior state officials, including the prime minister and speakers of the two legislative chambers. Viktar Lukashenka, 31, was appointed as presidential aide in charge of national security in early 2005. Prior to that appointment, Viktar Lukashenka served with the Border Troops, the Foreign Ministry, and in the defense industry. Belarusian Civil Service Law bans anyone from being appointed to a government position if that position is directly subordinated to an immediate relative.

January 22, 2007

BELARUSIAN PRESIDENT VOWS TO FIGHT FOR CHEAP ENERGY

President Alyaksandr Lukashenka on January 19 pledged that the government will continue to look for ways to obtain cheap energy supplies, BelaPAN reported, quoting official information sources. " We need to buck up, stop whining, and realize that nobody, including the closest countries, will give us cheap gas and oil. But it does not mean that the leadership of the country will stop fighting for cheaper energy, component parts," Lukashenka said at the inauguration of a new plant in Minsk. Lukashenka stressed that despite higher energy prices, the country's economic growth will not slow down. He also announced plans to modernize " several hundred" companies in the next five years and establish some 300 new enterprises. " This will be a totally new economy oriented above all at the processing of domestic material, the biggest possible substitution of imports and energy saving," he added. Meanwhile, the Statistics Ministry revealed last week that 517 industrial enterprises in Belarus, or 23 percent of the total number, were loss-making in January-November 2006. Moreover, as of January 20 the country's Belnaftakhim oil concern raised prices of gasoline at its refueling stations by an average of 5 percent, RFE/RL's Belarus Service reported. One liter of A-95 gasoline in Belarus now costs 2,100 rubles ($0.98)

January 31, 2007

BELARUSIAN PRESIDENT PLEDGES TO 'SORT OUT' TIES WITH WEST

Alyaksandr Lukashenka said at a meeting with Russian Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov in Minsk on January 30 that the Kremlin is trying " to choke and crush Belarus," international news agencies reported, quoting Belarusian official sources. " We are simply being abused. You can see what is going on now in the media. But they are doing this under instructions from the Kremlin. This I can tell you for certain," Lukashenka said. On January 28, Russia's ORT television broadcast an eight-minute feature portraying Lukashenka as hostile to Russia and a liar. Lukashenka also hinted on January 30 that he may review his relations with Europe. " We recognize that our policy of developing in multiple directions has been turned into a single direction. It is very important for us to sort out our relations with the West.... Europe has seen that it, too, depends on Belarus in terms of energy supplies. Europe now views Belarus in a new way. A new situation has emerged," Lukashenka noted.

AND VOWS TO REMAIN RUSSIA'S WESTERN 'OUTPOST'

President Lukashenka also said during his meeting with Zyuganov in Minsk on January 30 that " Belarus has always been and will continue to be with the Russian people," Belarus' official news agency BELTA reported. " If you want to call us Russia's outpost in the West, please do. We have never rejected this [label]," Lukashenka added. In an apparent reference to his interview with the German daily *Die Welt* last week, where he pledged to cooperate with the West, Lukashenka told Zyuganov that he does not " flirt" with the West. " If we had conducted a pro-Western policy, NATO troops would have been here long ago. They would have been here earlier than in any other country. But we have always been with Russia," Lukashenka stressed.

February 7, 2007
BELARUSIAN PRESIDENT REJECTS RUSSIA'S 'IMPERIAL' APPROACH

President Alyaksandr Lukashenka said in an interview with Reuters on February 6 that the recent gas-and-oil price hikes by Russia were " barbaric actions" taken toward Belarusians who, he added, are " practically one and the same people " as Russians. Lukashenka asserted that the idea of a union state with Russia is still on his agenda, but stressed that Belarus will never become a part of Russia. " There are increasing imperial tones to Russian policy," the Belarusian leader said. " And I believe that this aspect of the policy of the Russian leadership is dangerous not just for Belarus.... And the reason behind that is the huge funds coming into Russia from sales of oil, gas, and other natural resources. But it won't always be like that. Our time will come."

AND EUROPEAN CALLS FOR DEMOCRATIZATION

President Lukashenka in the same interview with Reuters rejected the possibility of democratizing public life in Belarus. "All the demands on Belarus on human rights and democratization, made at the instigation of the Americans, were tantamount to saying that we should dismantle our political system. And it is also understood throughout that the current president is illegitimate and should step down," Lukashenka noted. He stressed that he wants " to sort out" relations with the West, but simultaneously noted that doing so is impossible because of the travel ban on Belarusian officials imposed by the EU and the United States. According to Lukashenka, the opposition to his rule in Belarus is a group of " renegades" and mercenaries paid by the West. He also suggested that, his health permitting, he will remain in politics beyond his third presidential term that ends in 2011, when he will be 56.

March 20, 2007
MINSK AUTHORITIES BAN OPPOSITION RALLY ON OCTOBER SQUARE TO MARK 'FREEDOM DAY'

The Minsk City Executive Committee has banned opposition forces from staging a demonstration on October Square on March 25, BelaPAN reported. On March 25, popularly called Freedom Day, the opposition was planning to mark the 89th anniversary of the short-lived 1918 Belarusian People's Republic, which was crushed by the Bolsheviks. One of the organizers of the Freedom Day rally, former opposition presidential candidate Alyaksandr Milinkevich, told Belapan that the authorities proposed that the opposition hold a rally on a square on the city's outskirts. " We'll discuss several scenarios, as people will anyway be gathering on October Square and everything will depend on the behavior of the police and authorities," Milinkevich said. " My personal opinion is that the decision [on the ban] is illegal and we cannot obey illegal decisions."

4. REPRESSIONS

February 12, 2007
BELARUSIAN LAW ENFORCERS DETAIN 26 ACTIVISTS OF BANNED STUDENT UNION

Police and KGB officers rounded up 26 activists of the Association of Belarusian Students (ZBS) who gathered in a private house near Minsk on February 10, RFE/RL's Belarus Service and BelaPAN reported. The authorities banned the ZBS in December 2001 in what was seen as official reprisal for its campaign against President Alyaksandr Lukashenka in the 2001 presidential election. All the detainees were released later the same day after police officers shot video footage of them and took their fingerprints.

February 22, 2007
BELARUSIAN MINISTRY WARNS INDEPENDENT MONTHLY

The Information Ministry has issued two official warnings to the Belarusian-language monthly *Arche*, a Minsk-based high-profile intellectual magazine devoted to literature and culture, thus putting the periodical under the threat of closure, BelaPAN reported on February 21. According to Deputy Information Minister Liliya Ananich, who signed both warnings, the monthly violated the media law by publishing three issues in January and thus changing its periodicity of publication. The Information Ministry suspended the publication of *Arche* for the last three months of 2006, objecting to articles on politics and the 2006 presidential election published in the monthly's September 2006 issue. To supply readers and subscribers with the three delayed issues, the editors published them in January. *Arche* Editor in Chief Valer Bulhakau explained that had *Arche* not done this, Belposhta, Belarus' postal monopoly, would have canceled the delivery contract and the subscribers would be left without the issues they had paid for. According to Bulhakau, the real reason behind the current warnings were articles critical of top-ranking government officials published by *Arche* in the past. Bulhakou said a potential new suspension would ruin the monthly. " To resume publication, we would need to get the approval of the ideology department of the Minsk City Executive Committee, which is impossible in the present situation" he added.

March 15, 2007
BELARUSIAN OPPOSITIONISTS TO STAND TRIAL ON CHARGES OF OBSCENE BEHAVIOR

Belarusian Popular Front leader Vintsuk Vyachorka and another opposition activist, Vyachaslau Siuchyk, who were arrested in Minsk on March 13, were released on March 14 and are to stand trial on March 23, RFE/R's Belarus Service reported. Vyachorka has been charged with using obscene language in the presence of children. Siuchyk, who was detained because of his purported likeness to a criminal wanted by police, was subsequently charged with relieving himself on the street. Both politicians have been engaged in preparing an opposition rally for March 25. " I link both my arrest and my release to confusion in the heads of current officials," Vyachorka told RFE/RL. " They have no single concept of what to do and, possibly, different groupings are at loggerheads with each other. Some of them believe that it is necessary to suppress and whack [people] as usual. The others may think that it is necessary to make at least some gestures toward Europe, otherwise it will be quite bad." A delegation of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), led by Bundestag member Uta Zapf, arrived in Minsk on March 14 to hold a workshop on dialogue between Belarus and the European Union within the framework of the EU Neighborhood Policy.

Thoughts and Observations

Flawed Elections... and Parties

By Rodger Potocki

How Belarus' opposition parties, already under attack from the governing regime, squandered their meager chances to score even symbolic gains in January's local elections.

Two major conclusions can be drawn from the local elections held in Belarus on 14 January. The first is obvious: President Alyaksandr Lukashenka has engineered another manipulated and flawed contest. The refusal to include any real opposition representation on election commissions, spurious rejection of many democrats' attempts to register as candidates, intimidation of campaign figures, routine denial of permission for opposition election events, the alteration of election laws, and the refusal to produce campaign materials, combined to insure that yet another election in Belarus would not be free, fair, or transparent. Germany, as holder of the European Union Presidency, and EU External Relations Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner, were quick to confirm this.

However, the regime's violations of its own election laws, blatant repression and cynical ploys against democrats, as well as the pre-determined outcome of many of the contests, should not obscure what was also a striking failure of the opposition. After all, it was only a little more than a year ago when the opposition largely united behind a single candidate and worked on his behalf prior to the March 2006 presidential election. The result was the best-ever performance by an opposition candidate and a real campaign that resonated with significant parts of society. It is important to recall that, in those days, as protest rallies decried the manipulation of the election, the opposition United Democratic Forces (UDF) promised to stay and work together as a coalition to maintain and build on this momentum, and use the January 2007 local elections as another opportunity to reach out to citizens and offer an alternative vision for Belarus.

Sadly, there has been little realization of this sound approach. In the interim, the UDF's leaders seemed more interested in fighting amongst each other for the coalition's top position. Anatoly Lebedko, leader of the United Civic Party (UCP), and Sergei Kaliakin, leader of the Belarusian Party of Communists (BPK), clearly envied the domestic and international successes of the UDF's elected leader, Alyaksandr Milinkevich, and they worked both with each other and separately to undermine his position. Specifically, internal wrangling over the question of whether to hold a new opposition congress, its eventual scope, realignments within the coalition, such as the formation of a "Left Union," and internal party struggles, most notably in the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF), proved to be more absorbing and satisfying than a genuine united effort to build on the March gains by reaching out to local voters, formulating a common strategy, and taking advantage of breaking issues, such as the Russia-Belarus "gas war" and a new EU strategy for Belarus. As a result, there was, again, no common effort. As Ales Uladamirski put it on the website of the independent news agency BelaPAN, "the opposition failed to put into practice their key ideas for the elections – one team, one message, one campaign."

In fact, there was depressingly little effort at all. Finding activists willing to run proved difficult. While the regime did ratchet up its repression to intimidate possible candidates, the dearth of those brave or committed enough to challenge the powers that be was glaring. Even the opposition's initial claim of 1,000 possible candidates was discouraging, as this hopeful figure amounted to a tiny fraction of those competing for 24,000 open seats.

MUDDLED TACTICS

Following the registration process, which was also manipulated by the regime, opposition political party figures (about 200) accounted for only about 1 percent of all registered candidates. By election day, the survivors found themselves very lonely indeed. Representatives of opposition political parties appearing on ballots totaled barely 100 names (the number of pro-democratic independents is unknown). In the end, the regime didn't need to do much falsifying: with an average of 1.05 candidates per seat, very few races featured any competition at all. This was a markedly worse effort than in the previous local elections in 2003, when the BPK alone fielded more than 300 candidates and won over 130 seats. In fact, more than 180 pro-democratic party candidates were elected four years ago.

Few though they were, opposition politicians elected in 2003 were able to raise important issues, hold diverse events, and assist democratic forces in their local communities. Perhaps most importantly, they were the local human face of an otherwise fragmented democratic opposition that is rarely seen or heard in Lukashenka's dictatorship. These local councilors were the only opposition figures within the state's power structures. And, as the regular harassment directed against them indicated, many proved to be a thorn in the regime's side.

So what happened this time around? Many opposition figures indicated that they would run, but then weren't motivated enough to form initiative groups or teams to collect signatures. Milinkevich complained that many opposition candidates with plenty of experience made little effort or proved unable to comply with simple requirements.

Rather than trying to make the most of a difficult situation, parties couldn't make up their minds whether to participate or not. One foreign observer and former Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe election-monitor, noted that "the opposition as a whole is relatively apathetic towards the elections with many opposition leaders only half engaged in the campaign." One faction of the Social Democratic Party and the Belarusian Party of Communists, advised their candidates to pull out because of the regime's violations of electoral rules and practices – as if they had expected something different.

Lebedko, who is also a leader of the UDF, declared that the opposition movement should not boycott the elections and offer the regime a "cakewalk," but then pulled out himself. His attempt to clarify the opposition's position – "there

is no strict order to boycott but only a soft recommendation" – just muddled things. At a 4 January meeting, only 10 days before the elections, the political council of the UDF was still not sure whether its candidates should remain in their races. After telling a group of Western donors that candidates who resigned would betray their supporters, Viktar Karnienka, Milinkevich's right hand, withdrew just days before the polls opened. In the end, regardless of their party leaderships' recommendations, some candidates from each opposition party took part and others did not. Even pulling out of the elections couldn't be coordinated by the opposition. This apathy, indecisiveness, and duplicity insured that the opposition would make no waves during these elections.

What about those candidates who did make an effort? Well, it seemed that many of those democrats elected in 2003, as well as those running this time around, made opposition leaders in Minsk almost as uncomfortable as they did the regime. This was particularly true for the Belarusian Popular Front: many of its candidates from the regions were in conflict with key elements of the party leadership and, in turn, were not supported by them.

As if these internal conflicts weren't enough, a generation gap between many of the local candidates, who came of political age during and after the 2003 elections, and Minsk party leaders, a majority who belong to the generation of the 1996 Supreme Soviet, also reared its head. Finally, party leaders devoted most of their time to their own Minsk races, despite knowing full well that the regime would never allow them to win. These conflicts help to explain why local candidates received so little support from their Minsk leaders.

In terms of the leadership, Milinkevich's performance was the best of a poor lot. While he did squander much time, energy, and good will by spending six months in Minsk fighting with the UDF leadership rather than the regime, Milinkevich began trying to do the right thing in the late autumn. Despite running one of the best campaigns of the 2004 parliamentary elections, he was one of very few opposition leaders who chose not to run himself this time around. He at least made an effort to assist those who were trying to fulfill the promises and ideals of March. By serving on initiative groups, collecting signatures, and visiting more than 40 cities and towns in all six regions of the country despite constant harassment by the regime, Milinkevich proved to be the only leader who worked on behalf of candidates from all opposition parties, as well as independents. By acting as a real leader, taking the opposition's message to the people, and working on an inclusive basis, Milinkevich managed to preserve some of the UDF's honor.

Despite their agreement to work collectively for the opposition coalition, most other leaders spent the majority of their time in Minsk and traveled only to work on behalf of their own parties. It was a sad return to the disastrous 2004 parliamentary elections, in which party leaders put individual interests above the common good by not dividing districts, not working together, and running democratic candidates against each other.

EXTERNAL AND INTERNAL THREATS

The 2007 elections demonstrate once again that not enough work has been done by political parties to build and strengthen local structures throughout the country. Of course, the regime has done its part to limit party development. In the three years between independence and Lukashenka's coming to power, parties played a far more prominent role on the political scene. The first two parliaments were dominated by parties, but since then Lukashenka has worked to discredit the idea and practice of party politics. Beginning with his 1994 presidential campaign, Lukashenka has disparaged parties of all shapes and forms. Prior to these elections, "Europe's last dictator" declared that he wanted non-partisan, non-politicized, and non-vocal local deputies and elections, which produced stability and quiet. The regime had already done much to reduce "factionalism." Beginning in 2005, it dissolved the opposition Belarusian Party of Labor, helped competing factions of Social Democrats to cripple each other, and seems to be planning a similar fate for the BPK (the country's other, more traditional Communist party is in the presidential camp).

The regime's strategy has been to kick local party branches out of their office space, deny them legal addresses, and then question whether the national organization meets the state-mandated requirements to be legally recognized as a party. Opposition parties have had their offices raided, seen their materials confiscated, been attacked in the state-controlled media, had their leaders imprisoned, and been blocked from doing the kinds of activities that parties do, such as holding meetings with the public. Political parties are so weak that, of 23,791 candidates registered for the 2007 elections, only 535 were from parties, including those loyal to the regime. And the situation is getting worse: in 2003, 693 party candidates were registered and 257 were elected.

But opposition leaders themselves have also contributed to the slow death of party structures in Belarus. Perhaps the March, 2006 events reinforced their belief that only Minsk matters. In addition to the split in the Popular Front, the Social Democratic movement is in disarray. Since 2003 the party has split repeatedly and its factions have become increasingly irrelevant. Despite its leader Alyaksandr Kazulin's strong impact on last year's presidential elections, the decision of one faction, Belarusian Social Democratic Party "Hramada," to remain outside of the United Democratic Forces and to compete as a "third force," even with its leader in prison, has hurt the party badly. Less than a year after Kazulin's dramatic March moments, the party fielded less than 20 candidates. While a couple of "Hramada" and Belarusian Party of Communists candidates were elected, the left as a whole performed poorly, which is why it is now banking on a new "Left Union."

As Milinkevich pointed out, the 2007 election campaigns also reflected a certain lack of commitment on the opposition's part. Center-right parties were on course to do better this time around, in certain respects. According to official statistics, more candidates from the Popular Front and the United Civic Party were registered in 2007 than in

2003. Both parties should have benefited from a close association with Milinkevich, who is nearer to them in ideology and outlook than he is to the left. But in contrast to four years ago, a significant number of Popular Front and United Civic Party candidates pulled out before the election, for no good reason, 60 of the 100 Popular Front candidates registered, for instance. Looking back on it all, it is hard not to come to the conclusion that many opposition activists did not participate or withdrew their candidacy because of weak structures and lack of will.

DESPERATE, DEMORALIZED, AND MARGINALIZED

It is not only the Belarusians who should be blamed. Too many European and U.S. organizations working on election-related programs have repeated far too often that "there are no longer real elections in Belarus." This attitude lets Belarusian partners off the hook. Similarly to the 2004 parliamentary election debacle, in which pro-democratic parties also promised to work together and not to run candidates against each other, Western organizations are not holding their Belarusian partners accountable for promises made and then broken.

The local and regional coalitions put together by Belarusians and supported by several donors offered some of the few bright spots of the elections. Composed of parties, independent civil-society organizations, and trade unions, these coalitions were broad-based and included activists who had worked together for years. The concord and common efforts of these local coalitions differed remarkably from that of the Minsk leadership. Non-governmental organizations, for example, collected many, if not the majority, of signatures for local party candidates, and did much of the campaigning that did take place. In places such as Marina Horka, Haradok, Belazarsk, and Vilejka, experienced representatives from civil society, political parties, independent trade unions, and independent publications had worked together with the public for several years. But unlike in 2003, the regime was smarter about focusing on these civil-society "hot spots." And, according to media monitoring efforts, independent local media proved much less willing to cover any aspect of these elections than four years ago. Nevertheless, the best campaigns of 2007 were still carried out by similar groupings. In Masty, for example, a coalition of independent organizations, led by party and civil-society activists, played a key role in getting opposition candidates elected. A similar strategy helped many of the 20 or so opposition candidates who were elected.

After 14 January, it is sobering to reread a Belarusian journalist's analysis of the opposition's problems highlighted by the 2003 local elections. Back then, Alyaksandr Klaskouski believed that the opposition was neither psychologically nor organizationally prepared for elections.

"The election campaign reflected problems that have been long known — the weakness of the political opposition, underdevelopment of its regional networks, its alienation from the people and its notorious lack of unity," Klaskouski wrote. "The opposition failed to agree even on the division of Minsk constituencies so as to avoid rivalry between democratic candidates."

If the past is any indication, the future does not look very bright. One clear sign of the desperation, demoralization, and marginalization of the political parties is the snap decision by the UDF's political council to hold an opposition congress in mid-March. While a new congress could serve as a venue to acknowledge recent mistakes made and pull together, as the October 2005 gathering did, it seems much more likely to be the site of a bitter leadership struggle which will further erode the credibility of parties and the opposition as a whole.

One result of botching even the limited opportunities offered by the 2007 local elections is that the democratic opposition is likely to become even more isolated from citizens. The leader of the Popular Front, Vincuk Viachorka, admitted that it would be much harder to reach out to the public after the campaigns. But he did a poor job explaining why almost half of his parties' candidates forfeited the chance to connect with citizens by withdrawing from their contests. While the elections turned out to be a "formality" – in his words – for both the regime and the opposition, they weren't planned that way by the opposition. With no elections in the immediate future, the opposition has few other opportunities for making its case to the public, with the exception of street protests. As the regime's election-related machinations mounted, Viachorka and others declared that the main objective of the opposition's participation in the local campaigns was to "encourage people to take part in spring protests." Given the performance of the opposition over the past few months, one has to wonder whether anyone got the message.

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Source: TransitionsOnLine, February 5, 2007

BR Editorial comments:

The article makes a number of valid critical comments on the parties' performance in recent local elections. Especially valid is the criticism of the lack of unity and the absence of campaign dedication. However, it fails to provide a better understanding of the key underlying issues, mentioned in the introductory sentence, namely the ***meager chances*** to achieve results while ***under attack of the governing regime.*** To these should be added the ***meager*** and unfocused ***resources***, and the local councils' almost total ***powerlessness.***

The regime exercises total control over the electoral process. It ranges from manipulation of a flawed election law, total control over the voting process and its oversight, and constant impediments during the campaign, including the lack of access to all in-country electronic media, unjustified confiscation of printed materials and rampant prevention of meetings and other contacts with voters. **Is the 1% success in the previous election really that much better than a fraction of a percent, in these?**

The political parties had very limited resources for their campaign activity. The parties have for years without success requested outside support to establish regional offices and limited printing facilities. Local business support under the dictatorial control is almost non-existent. What kind and size of outside support was given to Poland during the Solidarity time, or to Serbia more recently? **In order to democratize a country the**

outside support is essential and it must be more flexible and focused than is currently practiced.

And finally, the local councils have no authority. All the power and the access to funding is in the hands of the regime's appointed vertical structures. Thus it should be small wonder that **so few opposition candidates are ready to lose their jobs, as so frequently happens, in order to campaign for election to a powerless body?**

Belarus: Lukashenka — Father Of The Nation, Or Loudmouth Autocrat?

By Jan Maksymiuk

Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka recently made headlines by disrupting Russian oil supplies to Europe during a row with Moscow over energy price hikes. The standoff capped a season that saw Lukashenka throw his weight behind a number of proposals certain to damage ties with Moscow — a union state with Ukraine, a transit-country alliance meant to counteract Russian pressure, and even eventual eurozone and EU membership for Belarus. What motivates "Europe's last dictator" to taunt a massively powerful neighbor that is also one of his few remaining allies?

Anybody seeking to understand Lukashenka's political behavior could get a good start by reading Gabriel Garcia Marquez's masterful 1975 novel, "The Autumn Of The Patriarch." Although Garcia Marquez based his fictional hero on a number of real-life autocrats from Latin America, the resulting picture is that of an archetypical dictator and patriarchal nation suffering the consequences of concentrating all possible power in a single man.

Lukashenka's life and career appear to emulate those of Garcia Marquez's protagonist in a number of ways — some deeply fearsome and some irresistibly comic. By a strange twist of fate, the only Russian-language translation of "The Autumn Of The Patriarch" was made by two Belarusian writers in 1978. It was as if fate decided that, of all the Soviet nationalities, it was Belarusians who needed most to look into the mind-set of people living under dictatorial oppression.

Mysterious Origins

The similarities between Garcia Marquez's creation and the real-life Lukashenka begin, fittingly, with their fathers — or lack thereof. Lukashenka's official website (http://www.president.gov.by) is laconic on the topic, saying only that the president "grew and was brought up without a father."

In fact, the identity of Lukashenka's father has never been disclosed. The president's patronymic, Ryhoravich, indicates his father was called Ryhor, or Grigory in Russian. One somewhat questionable account maintains the mysterious Ryhor may have been a one-eyed married man who saw his son as a small boy just a handful of times.

Details about Lukashenka's mother, Katsyaryna Trafimauna Lukashenka, have been somewhat easier to uncover. Journalists in the 1990s reported that Katsyaryna spent the early 1950s working in a flax-processing factory in the city of Orsha. She then returned to her native village of Aleksandria in eastern Mahilyou Oblast, her 2-year-old son, Sasha, in tow.

Lukashenka would later refer to Aleksandria as his birthplace. His official biographers have since offered a third version, saying he was born in nearby Kopys, in Vitsebsk Oblast.

No Fairytale Childhood

Young Sasha — the boy destined to become Belarus's first president — was reported to have had a difficult childhood. He was deeply disliked by his peers in the village, who tormented and mocked him as an extramarital scion and a bastard. Sasha repeatedly pledged to take revenge on all of them as soon as the opportunity presented itself. Lukashenka has presented himself as the "firm hand" Belarusians want . As an adult, Lukashenka has been prompted to describe his childhood only on rare occasions. Apart from his mother, he has never mentioned the name of a single friend or relative from that time. "In my childhood I grew up among animals and plants," he once confessed, and recalled helping his mother, a farm worker, to milk cows.

In his early years, Lukashenka dreamed of becoming a tractor driver. His thoughts later turned to a musical career after his mother bought him an accordion. In a propaganda film meant to boost his image in Russia in the second half of the 1990s — when he still nurtured dreams that a Russian-Belarus union would propel him to the post of Russian president — Lukashenka is shown in casual dress, amateurishly playing an accordion and singing a sentimental tune.

Man Of The People

In 1971-75, Lukashenka studied history at the Pedagogical Institute in Mahilyou. After graduating, he married Halina Zhaunerovich, a childhood acquaintance, and fathered two sons, Viktar and Dzmitry. His wife, who has never served in the capacity of first lady, was eventually dispatched to a lonely home in the country. Lukashenka is believed to have spent his recent years living with a mistress, with whom he reputedly has a child. "I'm not a family man," he has confessed, "because I've devoted my life to my work."

Despite his teaching diploma, Lukashenka never pursued a teaching career. He went on to graduate from the Belarusian Agricultural Academy and from there took up a number of low-profile, politically flavored jobs in the provinces. He alternately worked as a Komsomol instructor; a "politruk," or political propaganda officer in Belarus' KGB border-troop unit; deputy director of a construction-materials factory; and deputy director and party secretary of a series of collective farms.

A point of contention on Lukashenka's resume is whether he ever worked as a prison warden. Opponents are fond of the theory, perhaps because of the president's appetite for incarcerating political opponents. Lukashenka, however, vigorously denies he ever held such a post.

In sum, the early, provincial years of Lukashenka's career gave the future president invaluable insight into the character of ordinary Belarusians — collective-farm laborers

and industrial workers — who now form the backbone of his support. He mastered their natural idiom, a plebian version of Russian mixed with Belarusian syntax and pronunciation.

All this made it easy, when the time came, for him to appeal directly to the people's hearts, without bothering himself much about their minds. No other politician in Belarus — in either the elite or the opposition — has ever had such a forceful, almost hypnotizing, grip on an audience as Lukashenka.

Sasha Has His Revenge

Lukashenka also shared two more traits with those on the low end of the Soviet social spectrum: he was ashamed of his rural origins, and, as a result, loathed everything that was traditionally associated with them. In Belarus, this meant the native Belarusian language and indigenous culture. At the same time, however, he felt a deep-seated resentment toward the Russian-speaking urban nomenklatura, whose ranks were firmly off-limits to ambitious but insignificant country bumpkins like himself.

When he became president in 1994, the Belarusian language and the local nomenklatura both fell victim to his sense of vengeance. "The people who speak the Belarusian language cannot do anything else apart from speaking the Belarusian language, because it's impossible to express anything great in Belarusian," Lukashenka famously declared — in Russian — in 1994. "There are only two great languages in the world — Russian and English." Putin and Lukashenka are no longer so friendly. In May 1995, Lukashenka called a referendum that overwhelmingly backed his policy of integration with Russia and made Russian the second official language in the country. Belarusian, which enjoyed a brief revival in the early 90s, was enthusiastically abandoned once again by the very people who were expected to cherish it as the key component of their national identity.

The country's post-Soviet nomenklatura, meanwhile, proved indispensable — or, more accurately, highly dispensable — to Lukashenka during his first term. He routinely staged public humiliations of cabinet ministers and other officials, settling scores during televised conferences that showed him berating his victims for perceived economic and political errors. Often he pinned blame on them for his own fallacious decisions. At one such public display of opprobrium, Lukashenka went so far as to stage a minister's "spontaneous" dismissal, complete with handcuffs and immediate arrest.

Ordinary Belarusians watched such live programs with tremendous excitement. Lukashenka came over as a fantastic hero-leader, brandishing a sword of retribution over the heads of those they saw as their real oppressors. It was during this period that Belarusians first began to refer to their president as Batska, or "father" in Belarusian. His tough-guy approach to politics had strong appeal for a society craving authority and a firm hand — the same society that had been overwhelmingly rural and patriarchal only a half-century ago.

Losing His Way?

In the 1950s and 1960s, Belarusians were subjected to a merciless social and cultural uprooting through the dual forces of industrialization and urbanization – accompanied by forced Sovietization and Russification. Lukashenka lacked qualified expertise in the social manipulation of people, but he compensated with keen political instinct and a deep understanding of the national psyche. He assumed the role of father figure to a people who had lost their orientation following the collapse of the Soviet Union. It has been that genuine popular support, reinforced by generous Russian energy subsidies, that has allowed Lukashenka to avoid any major economic or social upheaval during the past 12 years.

Now that the subsidies seem to be over, Lukashenka's Soviet-style leadership techniques may become worthless. His recent flurry of contradictory political ideas and statements — including a union with Ukraine and other energy-transit countries to balance Russia's increasing assertiveness in energy policies — may be a sign that his political instinct has begun to fail him as well.

Another factor that bodes ill for Lukashenka's future is his isolation from the ruling class in Belarus. In January, at the height of his energy-pricing dispute with Russia, Lukashenka appointed his 31-year-old son, Viktar, to the Security Council, granting the politically inexperienced young man a status equal to that of the KGB chief or the interior minister.

Some analysts have speculated that Lukashenka may be priming his son to serve as his successor. But the reason for the appointment actually seems to be much simpler — the solitary president lacks qualified and trustworthy candidates to fill senior state positions and replace the battered and exhausted political veterans who have managed to remain in government.

Legendary Malapropisms

Lukashenka is famous among state leaders for his idiosyncratic pronouncements and verbal meltdowns. Many of his sayings — like "I will not lead my nation after the civilized world" — have earned a place in the pages of post-Soviet political folklore. Hardly one among them can be commended for its wisdom or wit. But many are inadvertently funny because of their bizarreness, silliness, or even unintended obscenity.

Some of them, taken at face value, are terrifying — such as the one in which Lukashenka, in a 1995 interview with Germany's *Handelsblatt* newspaper, praises Hitler's Third Reich as an example worthy of emulation for other nation builders.Is Lukashenka grooming his son Viktar to succeed him? "Not everything connected with Germany and a certain Adolf Hitler was bad," he said. "The German order had been formed throughout centuries. Under Hitler this formation reached its peak. This is what conforms to our understanding of a presidential republic and the role of a president in it."

Handelsblatt prudently opted to remove this passage from the published text of the interview. But Belarusian Radio twice broadcast the recorded conversation in its entirety, raising a cry of indignation in some domestic and international media for the extreme callousness of his remark.

Did Lukashenka really mean what he said? Did he want to build a fascist state in Belarus? Many journalists were

quick to say yes. But another explanation, odd as it may seem, is more plausible: Lukashenka, wanting to please his interviewers, had thought it right to praise German "order." Through the simplicity of his soul or lack of exposure to the West, it may be the Belarusian president simply did not realize that Hitler's contributions to that "order" were beyond mention, in Germany and elsewhere



Priming his son for succession?

Even more disturbing is the fact that Lukashenka afterward flatly denied ever making such a statement. The Belarusian president does not like to admit his mistakes. This denial, along with the Hitler quote, was recalled by Russia's Channel One television in a January program portraying Lukashenka as a brazen liar.

Another odd move came in November 2006. While giving an interview to a group of Ukrainian journalists in Minsk, Lukashenka suddenly floated the idea of creating a Ukraine-Belarus union — adding that such a project had a better chance of success than the languishing Russia-Belarus Union State.

Lukashenka clearly sensed trouble ahead. Anticipating problems with energy deliveries from Russia, he was eager to send a signal to Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko -- himself no stranger to the strong arm of Russian energy politics — that it was time for the two of them to get together for a talk. Chances are, however, that the pro-Western Yushchenko was as stupefied by the proposal as the journalists in Minsk.

More recently, in a January interview with the German daily *Die Welt*, Lukashenka suggested Belarus was ready to be an "eager pupil" of the West and that he personally envisioned his country someday following the model of Germany or Sweden. His comments appeared to be a fleeting overture to the West. A week later, meeting with Russian Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov, Lukashenka was back in traditional form — pledging that Belarus will continue to serve as Russia's "outpost" in the West.

His most recent foreign interview, to the Reuters news agency, finds him not trying to make friends with anyone in particular. Neither Russia nor Europe are essential to Belarus's survival, he said in classically bullish mode.

The erratic nature of Lukashenka's public pronouncements defy literal interpretation. Building any hopes on his words is a senseless task. As long as Lukashenka eludes the pinch of an acute economic necessity, he'll stay in one place and won't lead his nation anywhere — neither to Sweden, nor to Russia.

'Festival' Of Democracy

It is his narrow-mindedness, and not his shrewdness, that presents the biggest obstacle to easing Lukashenka onto a more democratic path. The president has a clear vision of his role in Belarus — he is a provider who carefully attends to the concerns of the common people, and severely punishes those who do them harm. It is hard for him to envision a Belarus without Lukashenka. It is hard for him to envision a world in which other people feel differently.

The stagecraft behind Belarusian elections — routinely criticized by observers — is an exercise in simulated democracy that Lukashenka appears convinced is precisely what the people need. He drove this point home in comments following the March 2006 presidential vote handing him an unprecedented third term.The March 2006 presidential election was not a "festival" for the opposition (epa)"How can a normal, reasonable, good, decent man — I've told this to [election] observers -- say that this [election] process was undemocratic? We have made a festival out of this election," he said. "Do you know why I did this? [Because] polling stations were visited by my people, who some time ago supported me so stunningly and unexpectedly, when I was [a novice in politics], you remember, 10 years ago. And I will do everything possible to make more festivals of this sort for my people."

Lukashenka may be right when he asserts that for "his people" nationwide elections and referendums have so far been "festivals." On election day, many polling stations offer vodka, sausages, and other commodities at discounted prices, and most people rightfully enjoy taking advantage of such opportunities. As long as such discount prices are possible, the festival may go on.

But some of the perks — including substantial oil and gas subsidies — have already begun to dry up. The festival atmosphere may come to a sudden end once Belarusians are made to pay in full for everything they now buy at discount rates.

The reality is that Lukashenka has failed to build a self-sustaining economy or functional state institutions. Belarus under his rule looks like a failed state. Lukashenka's bizarre public boast that he falsified the 2006 presidential vote in order to give the opposition at least some of the votes only underscores his profound political failure.

"Yes, we falsified the last election. I have already told the Westerners about this," he told Ukrainian journalists in Minsk on November 23. "As much as 93.5 percent voted for President Lukashenka. But they say this is not a European figure. So we made it 86 [percent]. That was true. If we were to start recounting ballots now, I don't know what we would do with them. The Europeans told us before the election that if there were approximately European figures in the election, they would recognize our election. [So] we tried to make European figures."

Making election figures look more "European" appears to be an easy task for Lukashenka. Making Belarus look more "European" seems to be totally beyond his ability.

Source: RFE/RL Newsline, February 8, 2007

Milinkevich: a Consolidator, Not a Dictator

By David Marples

As the proposed date for the Second Congress of the United Democratic Forces (UDF) of Belarus approaches (March 17), leaders of the Belarusian opposition are engaged in an animated debate on the future of the organization and whether its leadership should be elected on a rotational basis. The current leader, Alyaksandr Milinkevich, has alternated between statements that he does not plan to attend and that he definitely intends to take part. As a compromise, the leader of the Party of the Belarusian Popular Front, Vintsuk Vyachorka, has suggested postponing the Congress until May and of making a distinction between the head of the Presidium of the Congress and the leader of the UDF, with the former being rotational and the latter remaining Milinkevich.

Time is of the essence. Rarely has the opposition been presented with such a gilt-edged opportunity to wrest concessions from the Lukashenka regime, which recently received the news that neither the United States nor the EU has any intention of relieving travel bans on its leaders or engaging in a new dialogue with Minsk in light of its current difficulties with Russia without significant changes in the way the government operates. Further, the pivotal date of March 25 is also traditionally the time for mass protests and coordinated actions of public associations and political parties that oppose the Belarusian government. Some opposition leaders would rather organize actions for this date before turning attention to another Congress.

There has been a confusing series of statements and events with regard to the Second Congress. On February 14, Milinkevich declared that he would not be attending the Congress because the Political Council of the UDF had opted for a rotational leadership and had allotted priority to party forces over civic activists. Consolidation of parties, Milinkevich was cited as saying, was important but is not the same thing as the consolidation of democratic forces. A week later, he elaborated on this notion, commenting that the movement "For Freedom" represents the "consolidated democratic forces" of the country, embracing supporters of democratic change, European choice, and the independence of Belarus regardless of party affiliation.

More recently, Milinkevich stated that "Certainly I am going to the Congress." He qualified this more positive statement by adding that he would attend as long as it did not result in a major rift, and providing that a single, strong leader (implicitly himself) were accepted. He perceives his role not as a dictator, but as a consolidator of forces at the center and regions, and as the defined and accepted leader of the UDF, recognizable already in Western capitals and of growing stature in the regions of Belarus. "We are at war," he has stated, and therefore "we need a general, headquarters, officers, and soldiers." His critics continue to assail his attitude. Syarhey Kalyakin of the Party of Communists commented that he has been unable to ascertain Milinkevich's objections to the proposed procedures. Through his lawyer, imprisoned Social Democratic leader Alyaksandr Kazulin remarked that the opposition had achieved a great deal when it elected Milinkevich as the UDF leader in 2005, but now he was jeopardizing the existence of the entire coalition. (Interestingly Kazulin neglects to say why he opted to run against Milinkevich in the 2006 election rather than joining the UDF.)

As for delegates elected to date, and many have yet to receive final approval, the Party of Communists has 149, the Party of the Belarusian Popular Front 89, and the United Civic Party and the Belarusian Social Democratic Party (Hramada) both have 53. However, there are 96 supporters of Milinkevich's For Freedom movement, and he is likely to garner support from a number of fringe groups, as well as rank-and-file members of the Popular Front. An option is also being floated of inviting delegates from the 2005 Congress to participate as well. Thus, assuming the Congress takes place as scheduled and Milinkevich attends, he would have a reasonable chance of being reelected as leader.

Last week three prominent opposition leaders, Vyachorka, Kalyakin, and Anatol Lyabedzka, visited Washington, DC, for meetings in the U.S. Department of State and major non-government organizations: (United Civic Party). It is evident that both United States and the EU remain supportive of the UDF for now. Thus it is critical for unity to be maintained at all costs, and whether a potentially fractious Second Congress, only eighteen months after the first one, would be beneficial to the opposition cause remains a moot point. Though the quest for democratic procedures is admirable, there is no immediate reason why Milinkevich should be replaced so suddenly, particularly in view of his achievements to date. That he is better known outside the country than within is merely a reflection of the brevity of his leadership. As he notes himself, he remains outside party structures, but that is hardly a disadvantage given the general apathy or disdain of the electorate toward the current batch of political parties.

There seems little justification, therefore, for any radical change of course by the United Opposition during this difficult period between the frenetic activity of presidential and parliamentary elections.

Source: Eurasia Daily Monitor, March 5, 2007

Brussels Mistrusts Belarus' Pro-EU Talk

By Andrew Rettman

Belarus leader Aleksander Lukashenka's recent pro-EU statements are unlikely to translate into real perestroika in Europe's "last dictatorship" analysts say, but Minsk's energy rift with Moscow is posing one of the biggest threats in recent years to Lukashenka's grip on power.

"It is very important for us to mend relations with the west...Europe has taken a new view of Belarus and a new situation has resulted," the president told state-run news

agency BELTA on 30 January, alluding to a November 2006 paper from Brussels on how Belarus could benefit from EU aid if it frees political prisoners and holds normal elections.

Earlier this week Lukashenka urged the EU to end a travel ban on his officials and even suggested that he wants to join the European Union and adopt the euro, while talking about Russia's 1 January gas and oil price hikes in terms of "stinking carrion" and a "massive attack on Belarus."

The rhetoric was accompanied by a stunt involving NGO the Belarus Helsinki Committee which saw Belarus tax authorities evict the pro-democracy group from its Minsk premises on 30 January, Brussels issue a ritual condemnation the same day and Belarus change its mind on the eviction one day later.

The EU has responded to the new developments with a poker face - diplomats say EU sanctions will stay in place until Belarus takes "concrete" action on the 12-step democratisation plan outlined in the November paper. "It's up to him, he knows very well what to do," one contact said.

In the background, EU officials are trying to leverage the situation to open a new European Commission office in Minsk and ease flows of aid to opposition groups. They have also agreed to meet Belarus officials later this month to talk about potential energy projects.

But it is hard to find anybody in the west who believes that Lukashenka will change his spots. "Lukashenka is a criminal - he's not a partner for discussion," one senior EU diplomat told EUobserver. "If he really made these changes, this would lead to the end of his career and he would probably end up in jail [the international court in The Hague]."

Meanwhile, the new Russian energy prices are hurting the regime. Polish daily *Gazeta Wyborcza* says a knock-on 20 percent rise in domestic gas and electricity prices in Belarus - where people live on 60 to 140 Euros a month - has seen people rush to exchange Belarusian roubles for dollars or euros fearing an economic crisis.

Last March, 15,000 protestors defied government death threats to complain against Lukashenko's re-election in the largest opposition rally in his 13-year rule. A protest slated for 17 or 18 March is expected to attract fewer people, but in the long-term the end of the "Belarus economic miracle" myth could see opposition numbers swell.

Russia puzzles all

Meanwhile, Russia's shift has puzzled the most seasoned of analysts. EU diplomats in Minsk do not buy the theory that Russia is bullying Lukashenka into state union, arguing that a sovereign Belarus is tactically more attractive: it is a buffer against EU and NATO expansion and backs Russian foreign policy lines at the UN and in Russian media.

"It's impossible to say what Russia's plan is," Igor Blazevic, the head of Czech NGO People in Need, said. "You should never rule out the element of irrationality in Russian foreign policy. Perhaps they are just testing out their power. Trying to show Lukashenka and the west who's boss in Belarus. Testing out a scenario."

For his part, Lukashenka keeps firing back. Belarus decision to siphon EU-bound oil from the Druzhba pipeline in January - which led to the closure of the pipe - did more damage to Russia's reputation as a reliable energy supplier than Belarus. Minsk's January news bulletins are peppered with threats to charge Russia new oil rents this month.

Some observers say the scenario of a Russian-backed coup in Belarus is far-fetched. But large chunks of Belarus' KGB and civil service keep close ties with the Kremlin, while the pro-Russian wing of the Belarusian opposition, linked to Aleksander Kozulin, has reportedly seen increased funding from Russia in recent months.

If Russian-backed regime change is unrealistic for now, it is still more realistic than democratic reform or a popular revolution, however. "Lukashenka has been betrayed by the Kremlin and has nowhere to turn," another EU diplomat said. "If he keeps up this energy policy with Russia, he could find himself falling down the stairs or being buried in the woods."

Source: www.3dway.org, February 4, 2007

Lukashenka Promoted As Russian Presidential Candidate

A Russian ultra-right movement has launched a campaign to propose Belrusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka as a candidate for Russia's 2008 presidential elections.

Aleksei Kanurin, an activist from Russia's Movement Against Illegal Immigration, has recently inaugurated a campaign calld "Lukashenko-2008" and has launched a website to promote the idea.

Kanurin said in an interview published on the website that Lukashenka has not been consulted about the campaign.

"We do not need [such a consultation], our task is to create the situation in which people, including Alyaksandr Ryhoravich [Lukashenko], will have a choice," Kanurin added.

Presidential Ambitions

Asked how Lukashenka, who does not have Russian citizenship, could be allowed to run in the 2008 presidential election in Russia, Kanurin said it is a "technical issue."

"Representatives of this movement have not yet contacted the president's press office to talk about their initiative or their priorities and goals. That is why I personally do not have a firm opinion about this initiative," Lukashenka's spokesman, Paval Lohki, told BelaPAN on February 27.

In the 1990s, there was speculation in the Belarusian and Russian media that Lukashenka harbored ambitions to be the head of a proposed Russia-Belarus union state.

Lukashenka, who has been president since 1994, recently told Reuters that, health permitting, he has no intention of abandoning politics.

That has prompted a new wave of speculation on whether the 53-year-old president will run for a fourth term in Belarus' 2011 presidential election.

Strained Relations

Lukashenka is well known in Russia and is admired by some Kremlin opponents for what they see as his success in keeping Belarus' economy stable in the years following the break-up of the Soviet Union.

Relations between Russia and Belarus have deteriorated in recent months after a row over energy payments. The row resulted in an oil pipeline to the EU being shut down for a few days at the beginning of New Year.

Russia has more than doubled the price Belarus pays for gas and has imposed sizable duty on crude-oil supplies to Belarus in 2007.

Lukashenka has since made a number of comments in the Westen press about increasing ties with Europe. EU officials have insisted that Belarus needs to engage in political and economic reforms before the union will open a dialogue with Minsk.

Under the Russian constitution, President Vladimir Putin is barred from running for a third term in office. He has suggested that he will back a successor as the election draws near.

The two current frontrunners are seen as Sergei Ivanov and Dmitry Medvedev, both first deputy prime ministers. Some analysts have spoken about the possibility of another candidate, favored by Putin, emerging closer to the vote.

Whichever candidate gets Putin's support is likely to win because of the Russian president's widespread popularity and the Kremlin's control over much of the media.

Source: RFE-RL, February 28, 2007.



"Lukashenka-2008" website

Is Belarus a Pawn on Russia's Global Chessboard?

By Victor Yasmann

While policymakers in the EU fret about Russia's reliability as an energy supplier, their counterparts in Russia interpret the recent conflict with Minsk differently. Economic Development and Trade Minister German Gref and Finance Minister Aleksei Kudrin argue that the rise of oil and gas tariffs for Belarus has more of an economic than political meaning. They point out that Russia's forthcoming entry to the World Trade Organization (WTO) requires the Kremlin to raise domestic prices to world market levels by 2011. This is impossible to do without first raising energy-export prices, which is precisely what Russia has been doing — increasing gas and oil prices for its CIS neighbors.

However, another group of domestic analysts, many of them nationalist, interpret rising energy-export prices, at least for a customer such as Belarus, differently. They accuse "Western agents" within the government of Prime Minister Mikhail Fradkov of undermining the Russia-Belarus Union state agreement signed in 1997. One such critic, Mikhail Remezov, president of the Moscow-based National Strategy Institute, wrote on km.ru on 12 January that "the energy conflict makes the building of a Russia-Belarus Union state both impossible and meaningless." One of the most provocative analyses of the Russian-Belarusian relationship has been put forth by Sergei Pereslegin, a specialist on alternative-future analysis who heads the St. Petersburg-based research center "Modeling the Future." Pereslegin, who is reputed to have earned Russian President Vladimir Putin's attention and respect, argues that the Kremlin has in fact revised its entire strategy toward Belarus. The main tenets of Pereslegin's argument can be found in his book "A Do-It-Yourself Guide To Playing On The World Chessboard," published in 2006. The book was intended as a Russian response to Zbigniew Brzezinski's "The Grand Chessboard" of 1997. According to Pereslegin, the Kremlin has refused to fully incorporate Belarus into the Russian Federation — but not because this is not its ultimate goal. Rather, the Kremlin is merely biding its time.

Kremlin policymakers believe that Belarusian President Alyaksandr Lukashenka's policies are bringing the country to a political and economic dead end. Russia only has to wait for "the fruit to ripen and fall into its hands." Belarus is completely economically and politically dependent on Russia, according to Pereslegin. The Belarusian economy cannot exist independently of Russia's raw materials, which provide energy for Belarus' own industrial production. And Russia provides the only market for these finished products. Moreover, cheap Russian oil helps Lukashenka's internationally isolated regime maintain its political stability. Belarus imports and refines annually about 17 million tons of Russian oil, but consumes only 4 million tons. The rest Minsk sells to the West at market prices. The revenues

from these sales underwrite Belarus' generous social-welfare programs. In this way, not only Belarus' economic but also its social order depends on Russia.

Pereslegin also notes that Lukashenka's regime has no "national project" comparable to that of neighboring Ukraine, which has been building its own independent state for more than a decade. Belarus' leadership, on the other hand, has relied on tactics without a strategy or a strategic objective, such as an independent state. Lukashenka has backed himself into a tight corner: He has no other option than to push for the quickest union with Russia conditional on the preservation of his own status as president of an "independent Belarus." "For the Kremlin it is clear that Belarus eventually cannot avoid joining Russia and the only agenda to discuss is the details of the integration," Pereslegin writes. Pereslegin suggests the Kremlin has in mind only one scenario: full reintegration through the incorporation of all six of Belarus' administrative areas plus Minsk as new oblasts of the Russian Federation. Under this arrangement, Belarus would not even have the same status as the republics of Tatarstan or Bashkortostan. According to Pereslegin, Putin bluntly made this offer to Lukashenka in 2004, who angrily rejected it. "One can understand [Lukashenka's] position, since it would not only mean the inglorious end of the 'Republic of Belarus' but harshly upend the position of the Belarusian elite, including that of Lukashenka himself, " Pereslegin comments. But Putin remains firm, unmoved by Lukashenka's growing discomfort. According to Pereslegin, Putin knows Belarus has no choice.

In fact, Russia will win more concessions the longer it delays the "acquisition" of Belarus. The more time that passes, the more "profitable" the Union Treaty will be for Russia, whose businesses will be able to come in and replace the owners of Belarusian assets. At the present time, Russia would pay too high a price to absorb the unreformed, paternalistic economy of Belarus, according to Pereslegin. The Russian economy is more open and market oriented than the Belarusian economy, which responds to the decrees of Lukashenka rather than market forces.

Russia will win more concessions the longer it delays the "acquisition" of Belarus

Another problem is that the 10 million-strong Belarusian population has an average annual income lower than that of Russia. Well educated and technically proficient Belarusian workers earn lower wages than their Russian counterparts. They are now employed mostly in the machine-building sector, whose products are exported to eager Russian industrial enterprises. Full integration could trigger a massive influx of migrants from Belarus to Russia, which could trigger both social tension and a reduction of Belarusian industrial exports to Russia because of labor shortages.

However, Kremlin policymakers may eventually decide that political gains will offset the economic costs of absorbing Belarus. The Putin leadership could score a big political success by retaking "lost Russian lands." What's more, Russia-Belarus integration could "create momentum for further integration and political pressure on Ukraine and the Baltic states," Pereslegin suggests.

Pereslegin notes that timing is the critical issue. The conditions have to be right. First and foremost, the United States and European Union must not be allied against the project. Second, Russia would need to quickly generate additional economic growth from the absorption of Belarus to offset the costs of the incorporation of new territories. These criteria relate not only to Belarus but also to any further efforts to reintegrate former Soviet republics. These conditions, in Pereslegin's view, do not yet exist, but they are achievable in the medium-term. In the meantime, it will be expedient for Russia to delay formation of the union state, leaving Lukashenka dangling as if over a precipice.

Source: RFE/RL Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova Report, January 25, 2007

MEDIA WATCH

PRESS REVIEW

Russian gas prices to rise (*Kyiv Post*, March 1, 2007) — Russia obtained what it wanted from Belarus in the form of 50 percent control of pipelines and higher gas prices following a rancorous dispute in December 2006-January 2007. This is not the first time that Russia has raised prices of its pro-Russian allies in the CIS; last year gas prices were also doubled for Armenia. The price charged to Belarus doubled from $46.68, the lowest in the CIS, to $105 per 1,000 cubic meters of gas. During the five-year contract, the gas price would gradually increase to Western European levels of $250 per 1,000 cubic meters of gas.

The Russian-Belarus energy conflict spells the end of the project to build a union between both states, first elaborated by former Russian President Boris Yeltsin and Lukashenko in 1995. Many believe that Lukashenko had high hopes to become President of the Russian-Belarusian union by taking over from a frail Yeltsin. His hopes were thwarted by the rise of Putin to power in 1999-2000 as Yeltsin's chosen successor.

Since Belarus has no oil, gas or coal deposits, "Lukashenko's economic miracle," was highly reliant on imported subsidized Russian energy. Meanwhile, Russia's oil-fueled economic revival has engendered a self confidence unprecedented since Soviet times, increasing speculation that Russia seeks the replacement of Lukashenko by a more pliant authoritarian leader who does not seek to exchange Russian largess for the empty rhetoric of Slavic union.

10 Americans leave Belarus after ordered out for singing religious songs (*Star News Online.com*, March 17, 2007) — Ten Americans left Belarus on Friday after authorities ordered them deported for allegedly singing religious songs and reading spiritual literature, in violation of laws restricting religious activity in the former Soviet republic.

The Americans "preferred to leave Belarus voluntarily" after authorities decided they should be deported, said Interior Ministry spokesman Oleg Slepchenko. Slepchenko said police raided what was supposed to be a seminar in conversational English at an evangelical Protestant church in the eastern city of Mahilou. He said police found bibles on the tables, and participants were

singing religious songs instead of talking.

The Americans, who arrived in Belarus on Feb. 5, were fined and warned that they were violating the law with their activities, Slepchenko said. But authorities later caught them repeating the alleged violations, he said.

Lithuania exploring 'exit strategy' for Belarus leader (*EU Observer*, February 26, 2007) – EU state Lithuania and EU neighbour Georgia are working on an exit strategy for Europe's "last dictator" - Belarus president Aleksander Lukashenko - amid concern that Russian gas and oil hikes against Belarus are part of a wider process threatening the country's independence.

The prime minister declined to speculate whether such an "exit strategy" could one day see Lukashenko retire to a friendly country such as Venezuela, or whether it would mean a full rapprochement with the EU starting with, say, Belarus' release of senior political prisoner Aleksander Kozulin.

Lithuanian prime minister Gediminis Kirkilas explained that Belarus' conflict with Russia is "much more deep than it seems" in the context of a proposed Russia-Belarus state union that is being resisted by Minsk. "Belarus sovereignty is the main issue. Lukashenko will step down sooner or later, but to have an independent Belarus is very important [for the EU]."

Meanwhile, Mr Lukashenko seems to be grooming his eldest son, Viktor, for succession, having recently appointed him as a senior member of the country's security council and given him two assistants to underline his importance.

NATO Summit of November 2006

Belarusian Review had its own correspondent at NATO Summit in Riga, Latvia on November 27-29, 2006 — Mr. Raman Kavalchuk.

Since our correspondent's report was received too late to meet the Winter 2006 news deadline, we are publishing excerpts now:

The first important event in the framework of NATO Summit in Riga took place on November 26, when the Young Leaders Forum "Building Bridges for the Next Generation" gathered 49 distinguished politicians and public figures from NATO member states, Ukraine, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Middle East to discuss the role of transatlantic alliance in securing stability in vulnerable regions of the planet.

The Riga Conference, also held within the framework of the summit, was an official meeting on the level of heads of NATO member states and their governments.

Exclusive interview to Belarusian Review by Mr. Andrey Sannikau, former deputy foreign minister of Republic of Belarus, and international coordinator of Charter '97:

Did you find the Riga Conference important for the Belarusian delegation here ?

Yes, we cannot underestimate the invitation for the Belarusian opposition to this Summit, since this is the place where global policies are shaped. Here we were given the opportunity to learn the future policies of NATO an EU regarding Belarus - what we should expect from our neighbors. Obviously, none of Lukashenka's regime representatives have been invited, since the government in Minsk has no independent policy towards NATO. Meanwhile Russia is carefully monitoring the limited Partnership for Peace program, and informally imposing certain restrictions on it.

In my opinion, the most positive impact on Belarus was produced by the US president George W. Bush, who, in his address to the participants of the Riga Conference and the Young Leaders' Forum, presented his vision of a free, united and democratic Europe that includes Belarus. It breaks down previous longstanding illusions about solving the issue of Belarus with Moscow's assistance.

What will the result of the NATO summit mean for you and for the perspectives of Belarus' relations with the Alliance?

First of all, it seems wrong to make conclusions based only on relations between NATO and Belarus. The Riga Conferece covered much broader subjects: further challenges, agenda and strategy of the Alliance; the European neighborhood policy. In this context, NATO's policy towards Belarus, Ukraine and Georgia became a serious dicussion topic during the Summit, as well as Russia's future, its government, its domestic political process and its influence on European affairs.

The current energy supply crisis and issues related to energy security have been widely discussed here. Not just here, but also in Minsk, where Mr. Lukashenka is looking for solutions convenient for him. In this concern, Senator Lugar outlined in his speech the ways to protect Europe, the US, their allies and partners from the potential threat of irresponsible use of energy as a weapon by states rich in natural resources - particularly by Russia, which is already taking advantage of its own capacity.

Ukraine and Georgia are seeking to secure their positions in the world. This process is of critical importance for Belarus, as the model of these countries' integration into EU and NATO is currently being worked out. Georgia faces the dilemma of its own territorial integrity, while Ukraine can't yet clearly indicate its foreign policy vectors.

What do the European governments expect from the continuing conflict between Lukashenka's regime and Russia ? Do they observe an opportunity for substantial changes in Lukashenka's political priorities, or even the possibility of changing the regime itself ?

There are certain principles and values that are respected in Europe and must be adhered to in order to begin a real dialogue with any country. These principles and values are clearly described in the November 2006 EU proposals to Belarus. I am not sure that there is a political conflict between Mr. Lukashenka and the Kremlin, since certain agreements between Belarus and Russia, including a close military bilateral cooperation, are still valid.

Mr. Putin simply uses Lukashenka's regime to promote the controversial initiatives of Russian diplomacy. Therefore he could be ready for a compomise with the dictator in exchange for control over the most lucrative assets and infrastructure of Belarusian economy - primarily over the national energy transit company Beltransgaz. Even the Belarusian power elite is not aware of what is going on between Mr. Lukashenka and the Kremlin. It is an absolutely paradoxical situation.

Excerpts from the address by U.S. Senator Richard Lugar:

" Russia's turning off energy deliveries to Ukraine demonstrated how tempting it is to use energy to achieve political aims.

.. Russia retreated from the standoff after a strong Western reaction, but would NATO have responded if Russia had maintained the embargo? The Ukrainian economy and military could have been crippled without a shot being fired, and the dangers and losses to several NATO members would have mounted significantly... NATO must determine what steps it is willing to take if Poland, Germany, Hungary, Latvia or another member state is threatened as Ukraine was.

...The Alliance must avow that defending against such attacks is an Article Five commitment. (Article Five of the NATO charter identifies an attack on one member as an attack on all.) ... In preparing for such a commitment, NATO leaders should develop a strategy that includes the re-supply of a victim of an aggressive nergy suspension.

... Marc Grossman, the former US Under Secretary of State for Policy, has proposed reviving the REFORGER exercises of the Cold War. These exercises were carried out to prepare for the massive troop and equipment re-supply mission that would be required to thwart a Soviet attack. A new REFORGER should focus on how the Alliance would supply a beleaguered member with the energy resources needed to withstand geo-strategic blackmail. This will not be easy or comfortable for the Alliance. But, if we fail to prepare, we will intensify our predicament."



NATO 2006 Summit: Alexander Milinkevich with Zbigniew Brzezinski, former US national security adviser

QUOTES of QUARTER

"We'll blend the oil from Russia with (new) oil from Venezuela."

ULADZIMIR SIAMASHKA, the First Vice-Premier of Belarus at a ministerial meeting in Minsk on January 25

"Let them observe the traffic rules."

Minister of Internal Affairs of Belarus **ULADZIMIR NAVUMAU**, when questioned about the excessively frequent stops of Milinkevich's car by the traffic police.

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